

Technology and Moodle in the professional development of teachers: a glance at Italy

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The use of technology in teaching has been widely accepted, but sometimes the approach is casual and teachers are not conscious of the fact that they should develop their professional competence and skills in a continuous process in which technological innovations are at any level of the system. The aim of the article is to show that technology plays an essential role at any stage of the teaching profession: from the creation of an e-learning environment on professional matters to the use of an e-learning platform to support the teaching of a particular school subject. Schools and institutions should create learning communities to involve teachers in analysing their professional practice and being engaged in research, together with universities and research centres, they could deliver courses through an e-learning platform. The platform could also be useful to provide additional teaching and learning tools. Although in Italy the experimentation on e-learning and learning communities is only beginning, the use of a platform as an e-learning environment is going to be very successful. An example may be found in the use of the platform Moodle in language learning.

1. Introduction: professional development and teacher policy

Teacher professional development has emerged over the last decades as a recognised area of study with articles and books dedicated to the topic. Evans (2002) reviews the related literature noting the need for more definitions. Some researchers consider teacher development as a process of enhancing teaching's professional status by expanding the knowledge base upon which the profession draws and increasing teachers' epistemological awareness. It involves teachers to investigate their practice and build their own theories of teaching, a process of behavioural change guided by practical application of suggested innovations. More specifically Evans interprets teacher development as a process implying professionalism (status-related elements of teachers' work) and professionalism (those elements of the job that constitute the knowledge, skills and procedures that teachers use in their work) and defines teacher development as 'the process whereby teachers' professionalism and/or professionalism may be considered to be enhanced' (2002, p.131). She identifies two elements: attitudinal development and functional development. The first refers to intellectual and motivational development and the second to procedural and productive development.

Definition and identification of the process is fundamental for those who work in the field and try to uncover how teachers develop because it is only by uncovering the process that reliable strategies may be formulated. 'Those who are concerned to develop teachers—the government; school leaders, managers and governors; and the teaching profession itself—need to know whether, and with what varying degrees of success, teachers are likely to be developed by, for example: sending them on courses; imposing reforms on them; mentoring them; placing them within a particular professional culture or climate; or presenting them with problems and challenges' (Evans, 2002, p.135).

Defining and improving professional development becomes of primary importance when talking about teacher policy: recent studies show that effective teachers should develop their professional competence and skills to reach a high level of educational quality. The need to improve teachers' professional development is deeply discussed and analysed in the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) report *Teachers Matter: Attracting, Developing and Retaining Effective Teachers* (OECD, 2005). The report deals with school teachers and policies that contribute to attracting, developing and retaining effective teachers in schools and is a comprehensive international analysis that draws on the results of an OECD study of teacher policy, conducted in collaboration with 25 countries around the world.

According to the document, teachers and teaching are the most important influences on student learning, and 'teacher quality' is the most important variable influencing student's achievement. But if teaching is not seen as an attractive profession, and if it does not change in fundamental ways, there is a risk that the quality of schools will decline.

The same teachers are concerned about the future of their profession because they are not sufficiently rewarded and supported in their work, and are asked new responsibilities: they have to work and plan in

teams, plan evaluation and systematic improvement, use ICT in teaching and administration, know the principles of management and shared leadership. Some countries have high rates of teacher attrition, and teachers are concerned about workloads, stress and poor working environments, while in other countries there is a concern about teachers' knowledge and skills and the connection between teachers' professional development and school needs.

The conclusion of OECD is that policy initiatives are necessary at two levels. The first level regards the teaching profession as a whole and the need to improve teachers' development and work conditions. The second level focuses on attracting and retaining particular types of teachers in particular schools. To retain effective teachers in schools it is necessary to view teachers' development as a continuum throughout the career, evaluate and reward effective teachers, offer more opportunities for career variety and diversification, improve leadership, working conditions and the school climate. Teachers also need to be active agents in analysing their professional practice, creating learning communities in schools and between schools, with teachers involved in research and improvement of their knowledge. It is also necessary that teachers engage in policy development and implementation of school policies.

As regards the European Union, the cooperation on teacher education among the Member States has increased since the launch of the Lisbon Strategy in 2000 in a context of increased political cooperation on education. The European ambition was to become 'the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world by 2010' and the attention to teacher education at EU level, as a means to improve the overall quality of education and training systems, is developing on two main areas of action:

1. Improving initial teacher education to ensure high-quality pedagogical and professional training of new teachers;
2. Recruiting and retaining qualified teachers and ensuring their professional development to maintain and improve the quality of the teaching profession.

In 2002 the Commission established an expert group to support the implementation of these objectives, identifying key issues and exchanging best practices. They started working on the development of common principles on competences and qualifications and in 2007 they presented the results of their work on teacher education in a Communication on '*Improving the Quality of Teacher Education*' (Commission of the European Communities, 2007). The emphasis of the document is on the policy steps needed in the light of the current challenges, among which the Communication underlines the low investment and limited access to professional development, and the lack of coherence and continuity between initial education, induction and continuous professional development. The policies suggested involve lifelong learning for teachers, appropriate induction, mentoring and adequate funding. According to the document, teachers should be encouraged to continue to reflect on their own practice and to engage in classroom-based research.

Other contributing factors to the issue of teacher education have come from the Bologna Process, an intergovernmental process initiated in 1999 for creating a European Higher Education Area, and from ETUCE, the European Trade Union Committee for Education, whose publication in 1994 '*Teacher Education in Europe*' (ETUCE, 1994) stated the basic principles of teacher education identifying an agenda that is considered fundamental by the European Union and the OECD. Recently ETUCE felt that a review of its policy on teacher education was needed and a new paper (ETUCE, 2008) has presented the ETUCE's vision of teacher education in today's society: 'This policy paper sets out detailed recommendations on how we can ensure that the quality of teaching is high and that teachers are prepared to respond to the significant challenges facing education and training systems in the EU today'.

Italy is one of the countries in the European Union with little coordination between teacher's initial professional education and subsequent induction, in-service training and professional development. The connection between actual school development and educational research is weak and teachers have few incentives to carry on updating their skills throughout their professional lives (Commission of the European Communities, 2007). Until recently training and induction were absent and there was scarce teaching oriented academic introduction. Only experienced practitioners acted informally as trainers of the novices, but they were not equipped for their training role. 'According to an enquiry on Italian teachers that took place in 1991, most teachers expressed dissatisfaction with their preparation, especially with their training in general and specific teaching skills and expectations for change in contents and structure. A further inquiry (1999) confirmed the same dissatisfaction about initial preparation' (Todeschini 2003), while in service teachers felt the importance of constant updating. Among the opportunities for teacher training, teachers' associations and teachers' unions supported the idea of sabbaticals to spend within universities. New reforms have brought changes but they have been complex and controversial and the situation is still changing (see Todeschini 2003 for a more detailed description). The trend has been to offer teacher education and training in universities with a dedicated structure for teacher training that can also provide in-service training activities. Early childhood and primary school educators should have a university degree and a further specialization, while postgraduate programmes for would-be secondary school teachers, for a period, have included the attendance of a SSIS (postgraduate teacher training) subject matter-oriented and practicum.

2. Research and teaching

The relationship between research and teaching has been widely studied since researchers started considering teaching as a research based profession. At present many countries need to re-direct educational research towards the improvement of practice of teachers in school and reduce the separation of research from actual teaching. Hargreaves (1996) introduces a comparison between education and medicine. He states that there is a sharp difference in the way the two professions approach applied research. Much medical research is a type of applied research which gathers evidence about what works in what circumstances, 'a considerable proportion of the articles in popular as well as specialist medical journals comes from practitioners in hospitals and general practice. A tiny proportion of educational research - that is funded research, carried out by proper procedures and then made public knowledge through publication - is undertaken by practising teachers: the vast majority of such research is conducted by university based academics involved in teacher education who do not teach in schools (Hargreaves 1996, p. 2). The same author suggests a new partnership between researchers and practitioners and the use of more money to fund teachers as 'research practitioners rather than the objects of the activities of academic researchers'. Teachers and researchers too often lack *continuous professional development* (CPD) as pointed out by Evans (2009). Many researchers are people that after having completed their studies embark on a career in research after a doctorate. Their job is to study comprehensively the existing literature and produce new ideas and suggestions but many of them lack a culture of developmentalism, the desire to develop professionally. Evans reasons that, if researchers are not motivated to develop professionally, this could be because they consider the quality of their practice to be satisfactory and in no need of improvement, and they do not value their work/practice sufficiently to be concerned about improving it. Other causes may be seen in managerialist cultures within individual universities that have impacted upon the working lives of academics shaping and controlling them and determining priorities within their work. Sometimes universities do not consider professional development that focuses on the 'creative' skills of researching but a commitment to CPD is an effective tool for building a culture of developmentalism.

As regards teachers, apart from the initial period when they are asked to know and put into practice the latest developments in teaching their subjects, they can go throughout their life ignoring or only having a superficial approach to research. Many teachers have a knowledge acquired 'by doing' and only a few consider seriously the need for continuous professional development. Yet many studies show that *reflective practice* has a great importance. Doing research while teaching may be very stimulating from a professional point of view and transform 'routine' activities in activities on which professional development is deeply grounded.

There are studies (see for example Lawes and Santos, 2007) that consider teacher participation in a university-led research project from the perspective of teacher development, since teachers analyse and reflect in a focused way developing their practice. 'The engagement of teachers in research, particularly classroom-based research, is clearly not a new phenomenon. However, the collaboration of teachers in university research projects is distinctive from teacher-initiated research. When teachers participate with university colleagues in research they are able not only to develop their own ideas, knowledge and classroom practice, but they are also contributing to advances in generalizable knowledge' (Lawes and Santos, 2007, p. 224).

3. Technology, professional development and teaching

The consideration of teachers' professional development as a continuous process, that includes analysing professional practice, creating learning communities and being involved in research, sees ICT (Information and Communication Technology) as an integral part. Technology plays an essential role in the process of developing effective teachers thanks to the possibility to provide good quality professional achievements in teaching knowledge and competence and in developing and retaining good professional skills. Yet the discussion on the changes brought about by the adoption of ICT is still controversial: the expectation that teachers would adopt ICT and change their practices in particular ways is questioned by research that indicates that teachers have not changed in the ways expected. Some researchers think that the results are related to the comparison of actual teachers' practices with ICT against those considered as effective practices. J. Orlando (2009) explores the existing literature on the matter stating that these effective practices include frequency of use for knowledge construction, using ICT to enhance teaching efficiency and to extend and transform learning teachers' practices. She quotes many researchers such as Cox, Webb, Abbott, Blakely, Beauchamp (2004); Hayes, Blackwell, Anderson, Harriman, Lal (2005); Kemmis (2006); Loveless (2001); Underwood (2004); Vannatta, Fordham (2004); Watson (2001). For the vast majority of studies, the lack of change is due to teachers' beliefs and knowledge, students, professional development and expertise, the resources themselves and curriculum requirements. According to Orlando there is a common assumption that teachers will move along and complete a determined path of change caused by the 'techno-centric' expectation of immediacy of change in teachers' practices as a result of the use of ICT,

and this belief combines with the use of continuums and frameworks to measure change in which teachers' practices are expected to progress. Researchers adopt a generic approach and de-contextualise the decisions they are making in regard to teachers' practices with ICT. She introduced a different research design considering it as an evolving process fashioned over the course of the study and shaped by continual reading of both research and theoretical literature in a longitudinal perspective. This change in research design may produce new data but change with ICT is distinctive and complex because ICT resource innovations are continuously and rapidly changing. Exploring change from this perspective helps to understand how and why changes in teaching practices mediated by ICT occur and contributes to understand the phenomenon of ICT and the impact it is having on teaching practices.

At the conference 'Towards a learning society', European Commissioner for Education, Ján Figel', introduced the necessity to improve research, innovation and lifelong learning in a 'knowledge triangle', through the effective use of Information and Communication Technologies. He stated: 'We need lifelong learning for lifelong learning. But equally we need lifelong learning for personal development, self-esteem and to support a multilingual and multicultural society. ICT is an important tool in our efforts to improve quality, provide better access to learning and open-up our systems to the world'.

Thanks to ICT, teachers and student teachers can have an easy access to a network of educational contexts, where they can work with each other and within distant or local communities. They can be members of networked learning communities to support the argument of their learning and professional development. As Snoek (2003) states while discussing the quality of teacher educators in Netherlands, encouraging the use of the ICTs as tools to facilitate the learning process can be motivated both from an organizational point of view and from an educational point of view. Independent learning using the Internet might increase efficiency and flexibility: efficiency because online independent learning might be cheaper than lecturing, flexibility because a student-teacher is able to build his or her own learning route and to study where and when suitable. From an educational point of view, it can be motivated to experience how the ICTs can support learning, so that teachers (student teachers in the study of Snoek) will be willing to use them in their own teaching practice and improve the participation in the development of new knowledge, or collaborative learning. The use of computers and internet can thus enable collaboration, knowledge creation and professional development in communities of practice where teachers can join in a progressive inquiry on shared object of interest and their education is improved by being engaged in research work. The teacher as a *reflective practitioner* is helped by the new technologies to consider the importance of reflective practice and research, and cross disciplinary cooperation between teachers and academic researchers can be improved.

3.1 Learning communities and e-learning platforms

According to a recent study (2008) about research and teaching by H. Niemi (University of Helsinki), there should be opportunities to link teaching and learning together with the latest research on contents and methods of teaching, but this requires a new kind of co-operation with the academic community, with the organisational support of higher education institutions, to arrange platforms and models to join knowledge creation in pre-service and in-service teacher education. The same study refers to the need to create a research community linking together teachers, decision makers, and internationally recognized research. This requires new kind of projects where time and resources are reserved for collaboration. Researchers need funding in which new methods and time allocations are recognised, while practitioners need resources in their local contexts to become partners (Niemi, 2008).

At the moment (January 2010) many countries are trying to provide a national or local network through which teaching theories and techniques are exchanged. There has been a great development of sites where teachers find the latest trends in teaching, and publications and papers delivered at conferences and seminars. Many of these sites have areas in which everyday experiences can be passed and exchanged. The support of technology and e-learning platforms to the professional development of teachers in international learning communities can be found at European and international levels, co-ordinated by international organisations. European teachers can find national sites offering the opportunity to improve their competences and sites of the European Union that have an English Version. The spread of e-learning has given a new contribution to the creation of learning communities, but the model of '*schools as learning communities*' needs to be developed.

In some European countries, the use of technology in teaching and developing good teachers is still under research and experimentation. Sometimes e-learning has become the official way to complete the formation of beginning teachers: they have to attend a 'blended course' with material delivered through a platform and whose result is considered very effective. In Italy, there has been a great deal of innovation with the platform 'Puntoedu' that started being used to form operators in the education of adults and since 2002 has become the e-learning environment for the most extended online experience in Europe with the formation of more than 44,000 new teachers in every region of Italy and at any school level (P. Nencioni, 2006). Figure 1 shows a recent page of the platform:

cosa ti serve prima di iniziare

Questo è l'ambiente di apprendimento per i docenti neoassunti nell'anno scolastico 2008/09 con contratto a tempo indeterminato. L'accesso è riservato ai corsisti preiscritti dalle istituzioni scolastiche competenti. Si raccomanda di tener conto delle indicazioni della **circolare Prot. n. A00DGPER2360** del 23/2/2009.

I corsisti ricevono la password dalla scuola che li iscrive alla formazione. Gli utenti che hanno tra i dati di iscrizione l'indirizzo e-mail potranno utilizzare la funzione "Non hai ricevuto username e password" per ricevere i codici di accesso.

Inserisci il tuo nome utente e password per accedere

Nome utente

Password

LOGIN >>>

Non hai ricevuto Nome utente e Password?
Hai dimenticato Nome utente e Password?

Figure 1. A web page from the platform 'Puntoedu-agenzia scuola'

The model proposed by 'Indire' (Italian National Institute of Documentation, Innovation and Research in Education now become National Agency for School Autonomy <http://for.indire.it/neoassunti2009/iscrizioni>) is one of the most interesting online formation environments in the European landscape and has seen the cooperation of many partners and authors that have shared the initiative. Among them, many universities and research centres, representatives of professional associations, schools, regional institutes of research and regional school departments. It is based on a blended (integrated) e-learning environment, learning-by-doing methodologies, contents resulting from international research and a personalised approach. But this model remains quite centralised and the initiative depends more on national or regional research centres rather than on local schools.

In order to involve more schools and 'reflective practitioner' teachers a more autonomous e-learning environment needs to be developed: an environment based on a local school network on professional matters such as Teaching/Learning and Technologies, E-Learning, Blended Learning, School Management and Organization, Teachers' Professional Development, addressed to in-service teachers and other human resources working and studying in the schools. A single school or a group of schools, together with partners from universities and research centres, could join their efforts and deliver courses through a platform from inside the schools to help not only beginning teachers but also expert teachers and other learners who need to develop their knowledge and competence.

This kind of project may help to make the management of professional development of teachers less centralized, leaving schools to experience their own e-learning. Another advantage is to help the professional development of in-service teachers who want to do research and want to share their findings in a cooperative learning environment, and teachers who want to improve their effectiveness but lack the time and the opportunity to attend residential classes in different countries. To serve this scope, we need funds to support the project, an online platform and an agreement between schools and other partners, a network that shares topics of interest and the desire to collaborate and exchange documents and products to increase teachers' professional development.

3.2 Moodle as an e-learning environment

The use of an e-learning environment for schools in Italy is still under development. Different platforms have been recently used to deliver different courses mostly for adults or young adults and to increase the professional development of workers. Some of these platforms require specialized assistance, advanced competence in their management and are quite expensive. A different perspective is offered by the platform Moodle. As a software package for producing Internet-based courses, Moodle, acronym for Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment, is provided freely as open source software and you are allowed to copy, use and modify the tools if you agree to provide the source to others, not modify or remove the original license and copyrights, and apply the same license to any derivative work.

Many schools and institutions are trying Moodle for any level course to experience cooperative learning, not only to offer distance learning but for the educational needs typical of any school, that is the formation and updating of teachers and other human resources and the support to teaching different subjects, learning difficulties included. Its management requires specialized teachers such as technology mentors but the platform is very flexible and allows a choice of tools that can be adapted to the abilities of those using it.

There are pages with a free access and pages whose visit depends on the registration. By doing so the school provides online courses, increasing the professional development of the human resources, and extra courses for students who need them. The same teachers can plan courses addressed to a particular class and at a particular level with practice, tests and evaluation.

The main objective is to integrate learning with tools that are closer to the working mode of students, to elicit intrinsic motivation and to increase ICT competence and skills. Educators and instructors should only plan the activities and prepare the platform and its parts. The procedure to follow is not very different from planning teaching units or teaching modules, apart from the fact that presentation, exploitation and evaluation are accomplished online. The solution to the exercises can be sent via e-mail to the teacher or put in a particular area of the platform where the students can discuss in a forum or chat room. A particular section of Moodle offers the opportunity to create quizzes and interactive web pages.

Examples of the use of the platform in Italian schools and institutions can be found in the 'Laboratorio di Tecnologie Audiovisive di Roma Tre' (<http://ltaonline.learning.uniroma3.it/>) a University site, and in the site of a secondary school, the 'Liceo Aristofane' (<http://moodle.liceoaristofane.it/>) in Rome.

Figure 2 refers to a web page of the platform Moodle of 'Laboratorio di Tecnologie Audiovisive' at University 'Roma Tre'. On the left there is information about the use of the platform, the registration and the forum. On the right column there is the 'login', that is the access to the activities, the calendar and a frame with the online users. In the central part there is a list of the available courses with free information about them, while the little key on the left stands for the access reserved to those who are enrolled.



Figure 2. Moodle at Roma Tre

The third figure shows how a secondary school has started to use the platform. Always in the central part there is the list of the courses available among which some are addressed to teachers and educators interested in e-learning, Moodle and the school, others to students who need more practice in particular subjects.

The screenshot shows the Moodle interface for Liceo Ginnasio "Aristofane". At the top, a red banner reads "Benvenuti nella piattaforma Moodle del Liceo Ginnasio 'Aristofane'!". Below this, instructions for registration and login are provided, along with a "Buon lavoro!" message. The left sidebar contains a "Menu Principale" with "NEWS E AVVISI AGLI UTENTI" and a "Utenti online" section showing "Nessuno" users. The main content area is titled "Corsi disponibili" and lists four courses: "AREA TECNICA SPERIMENTALE" (reserved for administrators and authorized users), "TEST PIATTAFORMA MOODLE" (for testing and discussion), "E-LEARNING E MOODLE A SCUOLA" (for practical community), and "I sistemi lineari e la retta" (a recovery course for specific students). The right sidebar features a "Clock" and a "Calendario" for August 2009, with the 22nd highlighted.

Figure 3. Moodle at 'Liceo Aristofane'

A short web search can help to find other sites inspired by the same principles and using similar tools to create learning communities centred on a school or an institution but the research and experimentation on e-learning and learning communities in schools is only at the beginning. Encouraging the use of ICTs to increase e-learning in the professional development of teachers and educators can be motivated from the organizational point of view and from an educational point of view, but we need more experiences and research to explore new teaching and learning modes.

4. Moodle to integrate conventional class instruction in language teaching

Recent studies explore the increasing role of educational activities outside the classroom in the teaching and learning of subjects such as foreign languages. A study from the University of Leipzig in Germany (Bärenfänger 2005) analyses the topic of hybrid learning and the integration of self-directed learning and/or e-learning with classical classroom instruction. The study explores the existing literature on the subject and introduces the elements of the resulting pedagogic arrangements, noting that they satisfy the needs of learners, improve the quality of the learning experience, decrease the time needed to achieve a learning goal, improve quality of the learning content and materials, improve re-usability of the learning content and materials, reduce cost of program delivery, map learning components to objectives more effectively and reduce cost of program development.

Research results indicate that hybrid learning arrangements may have an enormous potential for optimising learning processes and both oral proficiency and interaction are possible even with distant or blended courses. According to Blake and others (2008) 'many teachers still harbour deep-seated doubts as to whether or not a hybrid course, much less a completely distance-learning class, could provide L2 learners with a way to reach linguistic proficiency, especially with respect to oral language skills'. They show that classroom, hybrid, and distance L2 learners reach comparable levels of oral proficiency during their first year of study.

As regards the Italian environment and my personal experience, most foreign language courses in secondary schools are designed for students that are from elementary to intermediate and are supported by textbooks that provide audio material by means of audio-cassettes and CDs. There is often a CD ROM with videos and additional exercises. In most Italian secondary schools the language course takes place mainly in the classroom (often three hours a week) with students having the opportunity to practice the four skills in a more conventional way. Some schools offer additional hours in which students are asked to work in the school multimedia laboratory and integrate their language abilities with ICT. The majority of Italian secondary school students have, at home, a personal computer and an easy access to the web but most of their time is spent chatting in their mother tongue and using social networks. When asked to visit foreign websites, find information in English or other foreign languages, do online language practice, only a few of them are capable to accomplish the task. The result is that most of the time is spent doing at school activities that could be done easily at home and very few students write and speak in a foreign language to communicate, apart from the simulations during the lesson.

The procedure planned here tries to solve these problems and aims to improve and integrate the learning process with online activities and an e-learning platform such as Moodle. Second language teachers can

create engaging online language learning activities using the Moodle platform and a recent book (Stanford 2009) offers suggestions and examples for adapting classroom activities to the Virtual Learning Environment (the author has also created a demo site: <http://moodleforlanguages.co.uk>), but what we are trying here is to use the platform to support and integrate conventional class language activities.

According to Brandl (2005) ' Moodle has great potential for supporting conventional classroom instruction, for example, to do additional work outside of class, to become the delivery System for blended (or hybrid) course formats, or even to be used as a standalone e-learning platform'. Moodle and its platform can thus be used to integrate a school course with students invited to join the modules and try the new experience. They can be asked by the teacher to attend the platform and receive credits or marks that will contribute to the end-of-year evaluation. The result of this kind of experience may contribute to support the use of new technologies in secondary schools and increase the foreign language proficiency.

4.1 Creating learning tasks

The tools provided by Moodle can be used to integrate any level course, provide additional work outside the class and experience cooperative learning. Teachers or instructors should first prepare the platform and its parts before starting the activities, caring that each language skill could be exploited and then they could invite their students to join the integration course.

4.2 Preparing the platform module

1. The teacher chooses some Units of the textbook (or textbooks) that can be more easily considered as Learning Objects (modular digital resources that are uniquely identified and can be used and reused to support learning, the main idea that educational content is broken down into small chunks that can be reused in various learning environments).

2. Some of the audio material (tracks) on CDs can be saved as audio files in a directory to be used as a resource.

3. Short video sequences can offer dialogues corresponding to the units chosen. Many sites, such as the site of the BBC: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish> and other sites, provide this sort of video material that can be linked or downloaded from the platform.

4. Additional audio material should be prepared such as listening exercises whose solutions and answers could be sent via e-mail to the teacher for correction or recorded by the students and put in an area of the platform where other students could access for listening and discussion in a chat room.

5. A particular section of the platform offers the opportunity to create quizzes of different kinds. Instructors and teachers who are familiar with 'Macromedia Flash' or similar programs can produce interactive web pages with exercises such as drag and drop or true or false. Otherwise each section could have some links to web sites with plenty of exercises. The teacher has only to take care that there is a great deal of interaction and feedback.

6. Evaluation may be done through different kinds of tests: at the end of each test a mark or score can be given to each student and added to the general evaluation in the subject, an additional mark may be given to the frequency with which students attend the platform and the areas in which they can swap information.

4.3 Example of procedure

To illustrate the procedure we have created a module choosing contents of pre-intermediate textbooks. The first approach after the login and the choice of course may be with a chart similar to figure 4.

<i>Let's start with Moodle</i>		
Section 1	<i>Making comparisons</i>	
Section 2	<i>Talking about the past</i>	
Section 3	<i>Talking about experiences</i>	

Figure 4. A language learning module with Moodle

Each Section can be opened either independently or after having done the activities in the previous Section. The 'i' on the right provides general information about the content. By clicking on one of the titles of the sections, e.g. 'Making comparisons' you can open a frame or a new window (see figure 5).

Section 1 Making Comparisons			
	Video:	<i>My town</i>	Video Ex. 1, 2
	Listening:	<i>Shopping for clothes</i>	Ex. 3, 4
	Reading:	<i>Fashion victims</i>	Ex. 5, 6
	Grammar:	<i>Comparatives and Superlatives</i>	Ex. 7, 8, 9
	Development:	<i>Tourism</i>	Ex. 10, 11
	TESTS	<i>Scores</i>	Exit 

Figure 5. The section of a module with Moodle

The exercises provided are interactive and can be scored independently. A particular area of the platform may be used as a forum where the students write their doubts and the teacher gives explanation. They can also suggest the answer to the questions asked by others. Another area may be used to chat in the foreign language. To avoid the unbalance between oral and written skills particular care should be given to the use of tools that allow the recording of the voice and the oral communication. Students could be asked to telephone and record their call or interview a friend and put the recording on the platform.

The ideas provided are the starting point for the acquisition of a deeper competence in the use of a platform for language learning but many suggestions can come only after having used the system for a long time. What is important is to explore new ways of teaching and keeping alive students' interest and motivation using their means of communication.

5. Conclusion

Although the use of technology has been widely accepted in the teaching profession, sometimes teachers are not conscious of the fact that they should develop their professional competence and skills in a continuous process in which technological innovations are at any level of the school system in which they operate. The aim of the article has been to show how technology plays an essential role in the teaching profession at any stage: from the creation of an e-learning environment on professional matters to the use of an e-learning platform to support teaching a particular school subject. The situation in Italy sees the experimentation on e-learning and learning communities in schools only at the starting point, but the platform Moodle as an e-learning environment seems attracting many users and the perspectives opened are wide. The use of the platform in integrating the teaching and learning of subjects such as foreign or second languages may be further developed and discussed. The article should be considered as an attempt to lay the foundation for a new co-operation between the Italian academic community and in-service (reflective practitioner) teachers that are seldom involved in research and asked to give their personal contribution. The emphasis given to the importance of using technology to enable collaboration, knowledge creation and cross disciplinary co-operation, between teachers and academic researchers, is certainly the result of my personal desire to overcome the difficulties that a teacher finds in relating theory and practice. My condition of experienced in-service teacher and my desire to develop my professional skills and competences have led my inquiry, and I hope to find partners to work with, inside and outside the Italian educational system.

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