LEARNING THROUGH PROFESSIONAL ENVIRONMENTS: THE COMCITY PROJECT

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ABSTRACT

UOCom is a virtual communication agency that has been set up as part of the ComCity teaching innovation project (Creus & Lalueza, 2012). Promoted by lecturers in the Information and Communication Sciences Department of the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, this innovation project proposes the creation of a set of 2.0 environments designed for virtual professional practices (e-practices) in the field of communication. In this article we describe and analyse the initial developments of the project, from the conceptual design stage to the start-up of the pilot trial of UOCom agency, which is the first ComCity environment to be put in place.

KEYWORDS

professional practices, 2.0 environments, teaching innovation

1. INTRODUCTION: CONTEXT IN WHICH THE PROJECT EMERGES

It has been shown from a number of approaches that digitalization processes are causing radical changes in the ways of learning (Siemmens, 2004; Seely Brown & Alder, R., 2008; Cobo & Moravec, 2011). Neither is it new that within the framework of our network societies, the abundance and disorder of information live alongside the proliferation of personal devices, spaces and strategies for the production and dissemination of knowledge that goes beyond the walls of educational institutions. This scenario poses a number of challenges to higher education. An important one is the need to enquire about the meaning of vocational training at a historic time in which the useful life of knowledge is exponentially reduced.

In many professional spheres, but primarily in those that are strongly influenced by the emerging information and communication technologies, the time lapse between the moment when knowledge is acquired and when it becomes obsolete is getting increasingly shorter. Generally speaking, we can say that a large part of the technologies that we use today in advanced societies were not used ten years ago. So many of the professional skills of that time have little or no practical application in today's professional contexts.

All of this has significant implications for professional practice. In effect, even though not so long ago the working life of an average person could be mapped out in a straight line – a career constructed throughout a lifetime – career paths today are generally much less stable. Richard Sennett explained this phenomenon very well in such books as The Corrosion of Character (1998) and The Craftsman (2008) in which he showed us how globalization and the flexibilization of employment relations is giving rise to ever

more fragmentary professional processes and identities. Taking digitalization processes as his reference, John Moravec (2004) also pointed out that, unlike industrial society which called for workers located in a specific place and carrying out very specific functions, the jobs associated with knowledge and information society have become much less specific in terms of location and the tasks to be performed. This is something that, according to this author, has a lot to do with new 2.0 technologies.

Seeking to provide a response to the challenges posed by this scenario, skills-oriented approaches are gaining more ground in university education. These approaches aim to enhance not only the development of specific professional knowledge, but also the development of cross-disciplinary social skills such as personal communication, the ability to work as part of a team or the capacity to understand and adapt to change and new work methodologies. From this perspective, professional practicums take on special relevance as a fundamental learning stage of a degree course.

Effectively, in more and more fields, the implementation of practicum is becoming recognized as a point of connection between the education system and the professional world, and as a key instance in the development of professional skills. Paolini and Rivarola (2012:20) highlight some of the possibilities offered by undertaking professional practices as part of university learning. They state that practicum:

- ❯ Favour the construction of significant learning that integrates the diversity of knowledge created throughout the degree course;
- ❯ Stimulate the development of professional identities through active and committed participation in practice communities;

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❱ Extend the possibilities of more autonomous actions with genuine role-playing tasks;
❱ Directly contribute to the start and consolidation of professional careers.

Echoing these contributions, the ComCity innovation project seeks to provide a response to the specific challenges posed by the curricular offer of professional practices in a distance education setting. It is worth remembering that UOC educational model is based on an open virtual environment and on flexible and asynchronous teaching and learning processes (Gros et al, 2009). In that context, undertaking on-site professional practices constitutes an alternative that is scarcely in line with the needs of a significant number of its students, who have chosen online education as an alternative that affords them, above all, freedom in organizing study times and space.

This is why it becomes particularly necessary to explore the possibilities of an environment where the students can carry out professional practices virtually, an option that is currently considered by a very small number of companies and institutions. With this in mind, the ComCity teaching innovation project proposes the creation of a series of 2.0 environments specially designed for the implementation of virtual professional practices (e-practices) in the field of communication. The objective, in short, is to create training spaces in which to reproduce the dynamics and circumstances of a real professional setting, such as teamwork, problem-solving under limited conditions of deadlines, customer orientation, etc.

In this article we present the development process and some preliminary results of the pilot trial of the first ComCity environment to be put in place: The virtual communication agency UOCom.

## 2. COMMUNICATION AND SOLIDARITY: A VIRTUAL AGENCY MANAGED BY STUDENTS

One of the many challenges related to the use of information and communication technologies in education is how to promote the collaborative construction of knowledge in e-learning environments. It has been stated on many occasions that although the relational trend is reflected in the technological evolution itself – as evidenced by the emergence of the web 2.0 and the so-called social software – the implementation of real collaborative processes in distance learning contexts continues to put up significant barriers. In this sense, a number of studies corroborates that the most frequent uses of ICT in classrooms, both by lecturers and students, are mainly to do with information search and processing, whereas the really innovative initiatives that pose the construction of knowledge in collaboration are still timid (Ornellas et al., 2009; Sancho and Correa, 2010; Díaz Barriga and Morales Ramirez, 2008).

The UOCom virtual agency is constituted as a 2.0 environment where collaborative work is the cornerstone of the learning methodologies. The students who do their professional practices in the agency work as a team, developing real communication projects for organizations in the tertiary sector. Consequently, all the dynamics carried out in UOCom are articulated on the basis of a network working structure that comprises:

❱ **Students on practices:** The students are the driving force of the agency. They work as a team, connected to one of the UOCom departments, carrying out tasks that are part of an inter-related and inter-dependent work system. They are responsible for the management and correct execution of the products and services that the agency is commissioned to undertake.
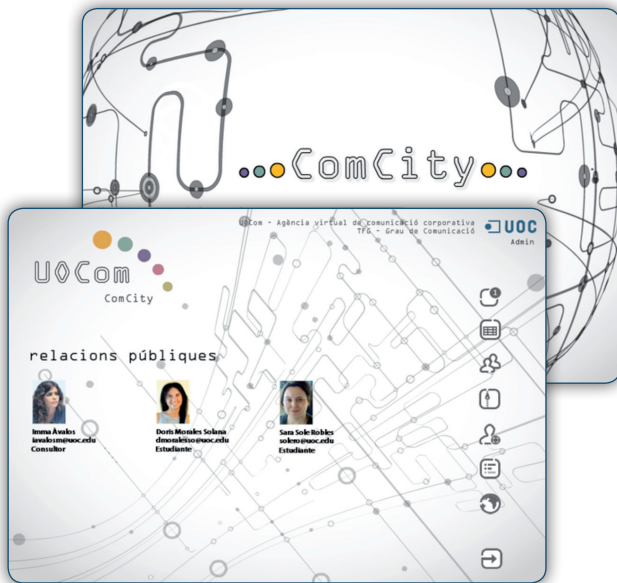
UOCom: virtual environment[1].

- **Department Managers:** Each team of students works under the guidance of a department manager, who is the person from the teaching staff responsible for guiding the students and coordinating their work.
- **Clients:** They are organizations in the tertiary sector. On the basis of a collaboration agreement, UOCom offers its services completely free of charge to non-profit making organizations that lack sufficient resources to develop communication products and services.
- **Board of Directors:** The UOCom Board of Directors is comprised of lecturers in the Information and Communication Sciences Department and members of the UOC Educational Technology team. The Board is ultimately responsible for the coordination of the educational project and the proper running of the agency.

All of these players interact in a work space – the UOCom virtual environment – that aims to foster and facilitate online collaborative work.

2.1. START-UP OF THE PILOT TRIAL

The pilot trial of the UOCom agency began in September 2012. As the framework of application, the Final Degree Project (FDP) of the Bachelor's Degree in Communication was selected. The FDP is a compulsory subject that carries 12 credits (ECTS) and is fundamentally geared towards the integration of the theoretical and practical knowledge gained throughout the Bachelor's Degree. This subject combines two pathways that complement each other. On the one hand, the completion of an individual dissertation; on the other, a professional practices period aimed at fostering the integration between theory and practice.

The UOCom pilot trial was put in place linked to the practical pathway of the FDP and was structured in three phases:

- **Phase I:** The first phase of the pilot trial consisted of a training period for the team of tutors. This training was done virtually, with a dual aim: 1) For the tutors to know how the environment worked and to explore the different tools included in it. 2) To develop collaborative strategies applicable both to the design of work activities and dynamics (by the tutors) and during the practices (by the students).
- **Phase 2:** The second phase began with the students accessing the UOCom virtual

1. **Tools integrated into the pilot trial stage: Forum:** Message exchange tool that permits the creation of lines of debate. **Chat:** Instant messaging tool that enables quick and streamlined synchronous communication between all the team members. **Calendar:** Online calendar. It allows the administration of different calendars and their shared viewing. **Video-blog:** Blog allowing short videos to be recorded and posted very quickly and easily. **Archive:** Virtual repository that permits the online creation and editing of documents in different formats. **Meeting room:** Chat video room for undertaking synchronous meetings (room for six participants). **Wiki and Blog:** collaborative websites that can be edited by all the team members.

environment and the development of the agency's activities. This phase took place between September and December 2012.

❯ **Phase 3:** This is the results assessment phase. It will begin once the practices period has ended and foresees the application of two main data gathering instruments: 1) the staging of a discussion group with tutors, developers and lecturers in charge of the project; 2) a qualitative assessment questionnaire aimed at the students.

A total of seven students took part in the pilot trial, with the start-up of three departments in the agency: four students formed the creativity team, two students comprised the public relations team and one student joined the administration department. Each of these departments worked under the coordination of a tutor responsible for structuring the work dynamics and guiding the students in the development of the practices. Similarly, two tertiary sector organizations joined the pilot trial as the first clients of the UOCom agency: the Mambré Foundation and the Integra Pirineus Foundation.

In the following section we show some of the partial results that emerged in phases I and II of the UOCom pilot trial. They are preliminary data that, afford us a glimpse of a number of trends about how the work dynamics in the agency are being structured and that enable us to design some improvement proposals.

3. INITIAL CONSIDERATIONS ON THE BASIS OF THE PILOT TRIAL

The process of adaptation of all the players to the UOCom environment entails the need to construct and experiment with new forms of interaction between people and teams. In this sense, one of the challenges associated with the implementation of this e-practices model is the transformation of the relations between the students and the teaching staff. It is worth remembering that the dynamics that are generated in a traditional virtual classroom (UOC campus classroom) are generally based on a two-way lecturer–student work structure, where the latter usually receives clear and stable instructions about tasks to be performed, execution processes and submission deadlines. This form of relation is usually a constant in the creation of work habits and in the configuration of the educational relations between the two groups.

However, the methodology of UOCom involved a significant change in work dynamics and consequently a major transformation in the roles that teachers and students had to be taken on. Specifically, we went from flows of knowledge focused on the lecturer-student binomial to a type of network organization where students and tutors constitute a work team, sharing responsibility for carrying out the tasks entrusted to the agency. We should stress that the collaborative work dynamics implemented in UOCom requires both groups to shake off deep-seated habits, as rarely during the degree course does the opportunity arise to get involved in the performance of tasks as a team.

Added to this, an initial need identified during the first developments of the pilot trial is that of having more informative and formative instruments that help both tutors and students to get involved in the collaboration dynamics and to know the various possibilities offered by the tools included in the environment. Consequently, an initial improvement proposal resulting from this first phase of the pilot trial is the design of strategies that promotes better adaptation to the work methodology proposed (eg a welcome plan that includes a more complete tutorials package and a more detailed explanation of the work dynamics and the internal communication channels of the agency).

Another important feature of the project can be seen in working for a real client, not linked to the university. This leads to greater motivation both for the teaching staff and, in particular, for students. But it also requires a dizzying leap from the prefabricated security of the academic setting to the responsibility of taking part in an activity where success or failure will have an effect beyond the classroom. Thus, UOCom follows the path of a prior training experience in the field of corporate communication (Lalueza & Estanyol, 2012) in which, though on a smaller scale, this connection to a real professional setting was already proposed.

Finally, it should be pointed out that from the perspective of shared responsibilities between people and teams, the network work structure generates significant challenges with regard to the construction of instruments that allow the assessment of the acquisition of skills at an individual level. It is expected that after completion of the pilot trial and the process to assess its results, we will be able to continue to make progress in this direction.

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