

Virtual Training Centers of the I*Teach Project - Continuous learning

Malgorzata Miranowicz, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznan, Poland, groch@amu.edu.pl
Gabriella Doderò, Free University of Bozen-Bolzano, Bolzano, Italy, Gabriella.Doderò@unibz.it
Eliza Stefanova, University of Sofia, Bulgaria, eliza@fmi.uni-sofia.bg
Desislava Ratcheva, University of Sofia, Bulgaria, dasenova@fmi.uni-sofia.bg
Andrzej Burewicz, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznan, Poland, burewicz@amu.edu.pl

New methodology of continuous education offers the opportunity to acquire new skills as well as general social skills in a flexible and synchronic manner. It also allows to learn and develop newly acquired knowledge by combining it with additional information in a manner that is much better adjusted to the possibilities of organizing the learner's own educational process. This flexibility of learning has become the key factor motivating students to continue their education especially in the context of modern and dynamically changing labor market.

Introduction

Continuous learning is nowadays absolutely essential. It answers the needs of the labor market. A conviction that an educated employee will maintain their high qualifications and knowledge regardless of the changing work environment has become obsolete. The ever-changing labor market, the structure of manufacturing and even the characteristics of some professions enforce continuous learning. Modern information and communication technologies change our awareness and thus they change societies. This leads to changes of the economy and alters the needs related to its functioning - the technology, the structure of work force as well as the needs of employees¹.

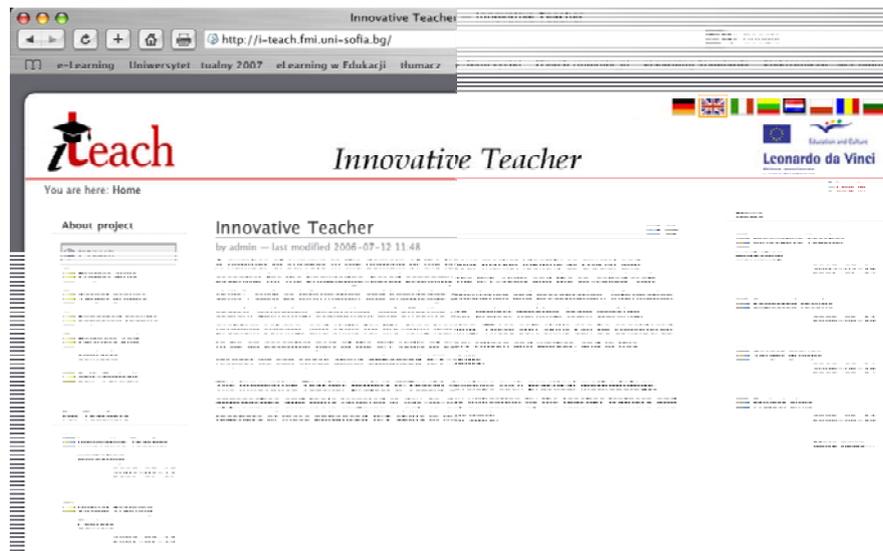
Nowadays not only the labor factors but also knowledge constitute the basis of contemporary economy. Hence the broadly used term "knowledge based society" and "knowledge based economy"². Not long ago qualifications of employees used to be confirmed by diplomas and certificates proving their knowledge and skills. Nowadays, the dynamics of economic and social changes enforces a quick adjustment of one's skills to the changing situation, which must include the sum of elementary competences, and skills of continuous learning³.

The rapidly developing technologies and knowledge call for continuous employee training. Therefore the concept of "just-in-time" training refers to the ability to acquire skills and knowledge exactly when the need of training appears⁴. It is currently believed that continuous training is the means to build knowledge-based economy, which was clearly defined in the Lisbon strategy as well as in the strategy of the Ministry of Education on the development of continuous learning, which must be completed by 2009⁵.

The European Commission worked out the definition, which says that "continuous learning includes any life-long educational activity whose aim is to improve knowledge, skills and competences of individuals, citizens, societies and professionals."⁶

I*Teach Innovative Teacher project

The *I*Teach Innovative Teacher* project is a pilot project launched in 2005 under the Leonardo da Vinci program⁷. It is related to the Lisbon meeting of European Council (2000) guidelines for life-long learning and using ICT's in education⁸. The *I*Teach Innovative Teacher* project has involved seven European Union countries: Bulgaria, Germany, Italy, Lithuania, Netherlands, Poland and Romania, and has been coordinated by Bulgaria's University of Sofia.



Picture 1. *I*Teach Innovative Teacher* portal <http://i-teach.fmi.uni-sofia.bg/>

The *I*Teach Innovative Teacher* project has been launched with the goal of developing a set of practical methodologies, approaches and tools targeted at day-to-day use by teacher trainers and teachers. The project was address the forth call priority “*Continuous training of teachers and trainers*” in the Leonardo da Vinci programme Call 2005-2006⁹.

Modern education is increasingly based upon active and pupil centered learning. As a consequence of that active, independent learning style a special group of skills is becoming more and more important. These so called ‘soft skills’ are the abilities of pupils connected to the proper fulfillment of their active, independently executed learning tasks.

I*Teach project mentions the four skills, most important “soft skills”: information searching skills, presentation skills, team working skills, and project working skills. Based on this systematics we prepared I*Teach methodology Handbook. Establishment of Repositories and Virtual Training Centers, provision of workshops and carrying our educational research were next important steps.

Virtual Training Centers

The I*Teach project is a multi-level one. On one hand, we attempt to examine how ICT skills can influence developing emotional skills; on the other, it offers teachers the opportunity to continue their own education. Virtual training centers have been created in many countries, which participate in the project. It has been assumed that Moodle¹⁰ will become the platform on which the participants will work. The courses prepared within the

project allowed teachers to be presented with selected ICT tools and the basics of e-learning. Moodle constitutes a very flexible platform which makes it possible to prepare training courses. In addition to this, no particular programming skills are required to create such courses. Only basic ICT skills are essential to prepare a course.



Picture 2. **I*Teach VTC Bulgaria**
<http://e-learning.fmi.uni-sofia.bg/moodle>



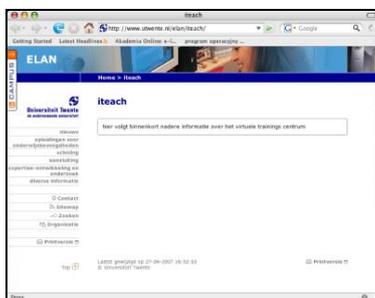
Picture 3. **I*Teach VTC Germany**
<http://nats-www.informatik.uni-hamburg.de:8080/iteach/moodle/>



Picture 4. **I*Teach VTC Italy**
<https://i-teach.unige.it/>



Picture 5. **I*Teach VTC Lithuania**
<http://distance.ktu.lt/moodle/>



Picture 6. **I*Teach VTC Netherlands**
<http://www.utwente.nl/elan/iteach/>



Picture 7. **I*Teach VTC Poland**
<http://zdch.amu.edu.pl/moodle>



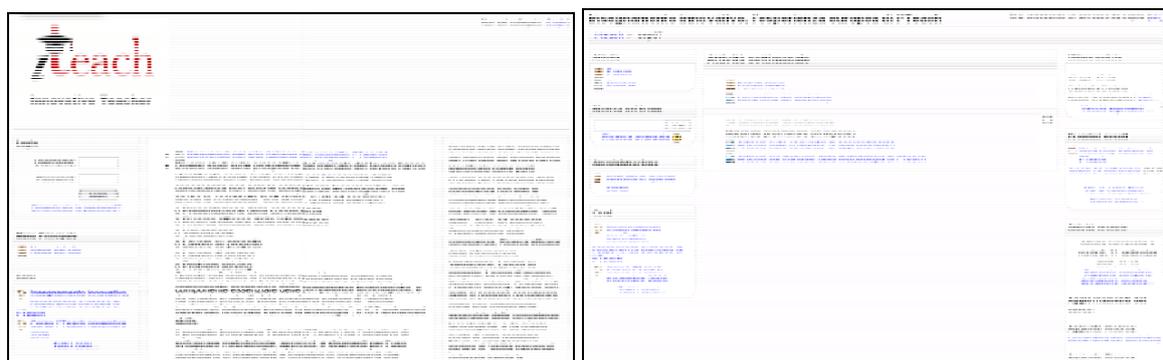
Picture 8. **I*Teach VTC Romania**
<http://i-teach.info.uaic.ro/moodle/>

VTC – Italy

The Italian VTC is online since March 2007. So far it contains only materials, which are relevant for the I*Teach project, and most of it is translated into Italian.

Two courses have been introduced so far in the VTC. They are open to guests and all material can be downloaded, including the I*Teach Methodology Handbook. The VTC is already a way to make I*Teach project outcomes available to all teachers, who wish to improve their teaching quality, and they may do so at a distance, and for free.

However in the future this can be changed, for example if other courses will contain copyrighted material, the site administrator (the University of Genova) may collect a fee from people wishing to download it, and then shall give them a password, specifically for that. So in principles, the VTC may even generate revenues and close the economic cycle.



Picture 9. I*Teach VTC Italy <https://i-teach.unige.it/>

A second purpose for the VTC, which we are just starting to exploit, is to make announcements and keep information about events like seminars or conferences of various kinds organized by the University, which may be useful for teachers of specific subjects. For example a debate about climate changes with famous speakers, or the presentation of a new book: such events are not strictly related to teachers' profession, but most teachers would like to be informed, and they would come to collect novel information to be presented to their pupils. Continuing education is again achieved, on an individual yet most important basis.

To announce such an event, it is quite easy to introduce the news on the VTC. The system then will keep track of it, and will show the date in the calendar of all users when they log in. If a teacher wishes, he/she will enroll to the event, and will come.

Also related data, like slides of the speakers, is kept in the VTC, being still useful even long after the event is over. This saves a lot of efforts to the organization of CARED, since updating such information in the VTC is quite straightforward.

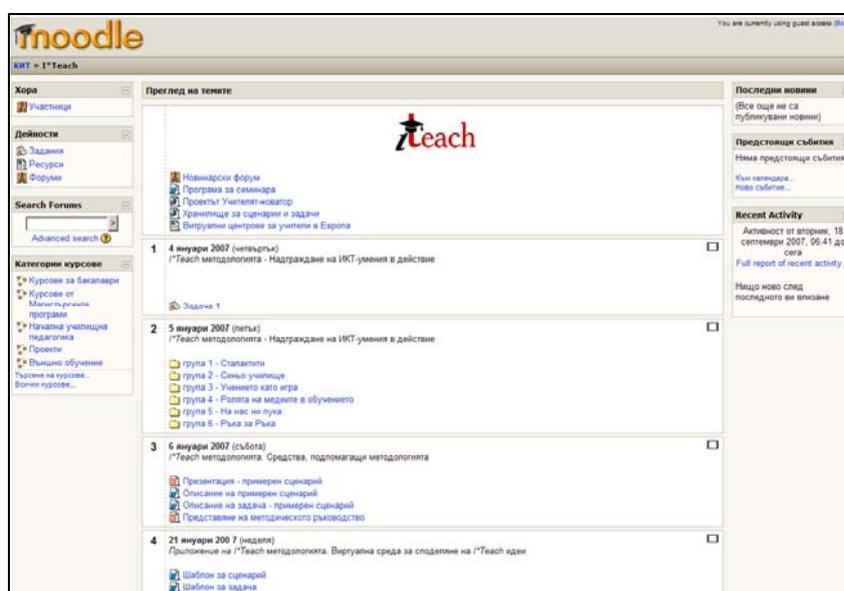
Technically speaking, the Italian VTC is an instance of Moodle which is managed by the central computing facility of the University, at the URL <https://i-teach.unige.it>. Moodle is also used at the e-learning website of regular University courses, but at a different URL, which is <http://aulaweb.unige.it>.

The separation of the two URLs is intentional, because the credentials used for logging in the VTC can be different from those supplied for logging at other University sites. This allows also people not enrolled in the University (who have no password for Aulaweb) to access the VTC, and this is the typical case of school teachers.

VTC – Bulgaria

The use of I*Teach VTC in Bulgaria can be summarize in the following:

- Support on demand on their daily work;
- Dissemination of the results and products from I*Teach project, even after the end of the project;
- Collaboratively creating and sharing learning resources;
- Organization of teachers training courses, seminars and workshop in responses of teachers need;
- Providing and developing of materials for teachers professional development;
- Announcing of information, such as innovation in education, seminars, workshops, conference and courses that are useful for teachers professional development;



Picture 10. I*Teach VTC Bulgaria - one course
<http://e-learning.fmi.uni-sofia.bg/moodle/course/view.php?id=80>

Additional to these, teachers can use VTC as database for searching of partners for their further works at school.

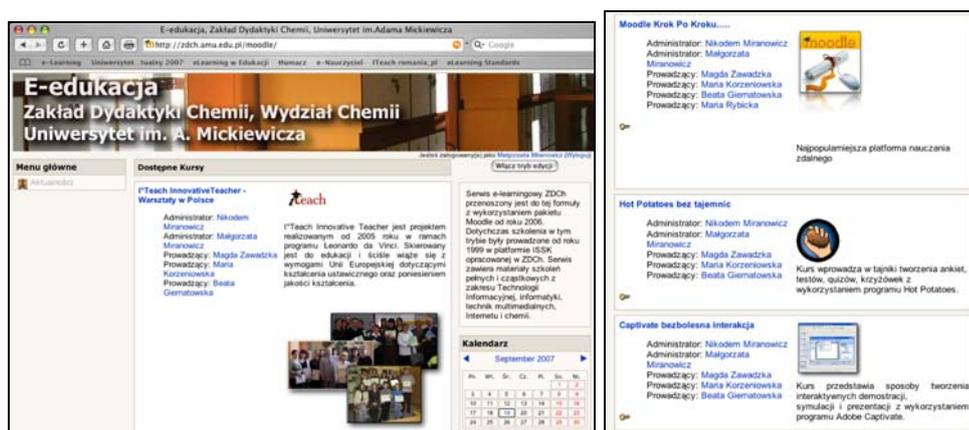
To support these issues we are using an open source environment – Moodle, which is available from <http://e-learning.fmi.uni-sofia.bg/moodle>. It is used to service e-learning activities for both - pre-service and in-service teachers.

VTC – Poland

The Virtual training center in Poland was installed at the Faculty of Chemical Education in Poznan <http://zdch.amu.edu.pl/moodle>. The Centers was came to live in October 2006. In I*Teach course on polish Moodle we present all material concerning I*Teach methodology: methodology handbook, presentations, questionnaires, tools courses

and pictures from workshops. We have separate courses about pedagogical research in which We present examples of scenarios based on I*Teach methodology and products e.g. movies, Point Power presentations, posters. Each can use from rates

Apart from the *I*Teach* methodology courses there are other courses presented on Polish VTC Moodle. Also they are broadened to "Moodle on Moodle" and "HotPotatoes with no secrets" courses. They are intended to prepare teachers for using e-learning in their work. The "Moodle on Moodle" course is particularly interesting as Moodle is a free e-learning platform, which is gaining acclaim at high schools and colleges. The participation in I*teach workshops was a great experience for teachers. As the courses were also provided in distance mode for most of the teachers it was the first opportunity to get a contact with e-learning platform. Experiences gained consequenced in opening Moodle and Hot Potatoes courses.



Picture 11. *I*Teach* VTC Poland <http://zdch.amu.edu.pl/moodle>

Conclusion

E-learning as a new form of education is very well visible in schools. In order for e-learning to mark its presence in schools, teachers must undergo a very well prepared training. The new form of education offers enormous opportunities to both students and teachers. It works very well within formal training, self-learning as well as continuous learning. Due to the fact that the school prepares graduates to function in the economic life of their countries, its methods must be so adjusted that graduates could flexibly react to the changing needs of labor market.

The European Commission suggests undertaking actions, which are to support the concept of continuous learning. They include promoting the idea of life-long learning among employers and employees. The barriers which hinder taking up or continuing courses which may be removed by involving the so called social partners in the development of life-long education on the level of formal education ¹¹. Improving the quality of education may equip learners with essential skills. I*Teach Project aims in fulfilling those expectations.

We hope that VTC will continue its functionality after finalization of the project. Those Centers are quite successful. In different countries they have different scope and are focused on particular national education needs. They give teachers ability to enhance their professional qualifications.

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