

Criminology online: an Italian Experience

Raffaella Sette, Researcher (setteraf@spbo.unibo.it)
 Department of Sociology, University of Bologna
 Strada Maggiore, 45
 40125 Bologna - Italy

Abstracts

English Abstract

In the article, my experience dealing with online courses on criminological topics carried out in the undergraduate course for "Security and Social Control Operators" (University of Bologna, Italy) is illustrated. Through the distribution of an evaluation questionnaire to the participants of the course, I have had the possibility of pointing out the positive and negative aspects of the organised didactic activity and I was able to collect valuable information with the aim of reflecting on the limits and potential of online learning methodology.

Italian Abstract

Nell'articolo viene illustrata una esperienza di corsi online su tematiche criminologiche effettuata presso il corso di laurea in "operatore della sicurezza e del controllo sociale" (Università di Bologna, Italia).

Tramite la somministrazione di un questionario di valutazione ai partecipanti ai corsi ho avuto la possibilità di far emergere pregi e difetti dell'attività didattica organizzata ed ho potuto raccogliere informazioni preziose ai fini di una riflessione su limiti e potenzialità della metodologia di apprendimento online.

Keywords:

e-learning, criminology teaching, undergraduate course

List of Topics

Introduction

The organisation of the course and the role of the students

The role of the tutor

Evaluation of the didactic activity

Appendix: The evaluation questionnaire

References

Introduction

For a number of years, I have been a member of a research team which is concerned with studying new didactic methodologies for applied criminology. Our studies demonstrate "how Criminology teaching methods are subject to continuous change in relation to theories and needs strictly linked to the criminological profession" (Bisi, 1998, p. 7).

I personally collaborated on a research project during which criminology teaching programs in various degree or specialisation courses offered in different countries of the world were collected and analysed (Balloni, Bisi, Sette, 1998; Sette, 1998).

The information, obtained through researching various curricula in criminology, has led to the creation of a three-year undergraduate course for "Security and Social Control Operators" which started during academic year 1997-1998 at the Faculty of Political Science "Roberto Ruffilli" at the University of Bologna.

I then followed a cycle of seminars carried out during the abovementioned course, during which the speakers, coming from the top management of important agencies and Italian firms, have dealt with the topic of the business crime from various points of view. This experience gave me the possibility of attempting to generalise the themes discussed during the seminars involving some main themes relative to the challenges that some productive systems must face in comparing possible destabilising criminal events (Sette, 2000). The program of studies analysed during this monitoring reflects a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary perspective that privileges the transmission of acquaintances, critical deliberation, integration between several contexts of human knowledge and technical-professional know-how. The organisation of the undergraduate course for "Security and Social Control Operators" involves, in fact, the realisation of synergies between academic and technical-professional teachings through modular didactics, seminar and laboratory activities, professional training and, beginning from the academic year 2001-2002, with its inclusion in the syllabus of the second year, the online course on criminological topics, for which I have been the head and the tutor for three years.

These were courses which could be used to acquire of three University credits¹. They were carried out during the second semester of every academic year and at the end of which sessions of oral examinations requiring the student's physical presence were held; the examination results, of course, took into account evaluations given during the period in which the course was held.

Given that this online course represents a compulsory activity for the students of the undergraduate course for "Security and Social Control Operators", participation has always been assiduous and the virtual classes crowded; in fact, during the first year (academic year 2001-2002) there were 157 students, in the second year 131 (academic year 2002-2003) and in the third year (academic year 2003-2004) 130.

The organisation of the course and the role of the students

During the planning phase, I questioned myself on the social and psychological dynamics of the net regarding potentiality and risks. On this subject, it is useful to refer to the concept of psycho-technology

coined by De Kerckhove (De Kerckhove, 1998). It is a matter of the technologies normally associated with language, and which represent a form of extension of thought and, in this sense, the computer is a type of psycho-technology, and the Internet may represent a modality of increasing intelligence and private memory in collective terms. In other words, it is possible to talk about "wide and complex areas of influence between the functioning of the electronic media and the Internet on the one hand, and the human mind and the collective conscience on the other" (La Barbera, 2001, p. 50), and these aspects can represent valid opportunities for the acquisition and evolution of knowledge, professional training and refresher courses as well as the cultural and artistic production, of scientific and creative work, games, entertainment and amusement.

Teaching methods based on the Internet considerably modify the modalities of classic education, integrating the typical characteristics of long distance teaching methods and the psychological characteristics of "physical presence", calling into play new dimensions such as the mainly active and participative role assigned to the subjects involved, the possibility of a greater personalisation of the path of learning and the well-constructed system of support tools and human resources available (Calvani, Rotta, 2000, p. 8).

Given that the online course organised and run by me is inserted in a educational route for security and social control operators, and given that the evolution of the role of these operators requires them to work in concert with the population and to resolve the problems that undermine the security of citizens from the point of view of the operative model of community policing, such a didactic environment represents an ideal place for the attainment of these educational goals since it allows students to work in groups and it encourages the refining of some capacities such as, for example, those of organisation and mediation.

In the online course I tried to apply some of the principles and methodologies to which an influential part of the literature on this subject has made reference (Calvani, Rotta, 1999; Calvani, Rotta, 2000; Maragliano, 2004; Nacamulli, 2003; Rowntree, 1995; Trentin, 2001). In particular, the course is based on the following assumptions of theoretical order:

- computer and telematic technologies are used as a support for encouraging educational training, and not as a mere instrument for delivering the subject matter. Moreover, one of the characteristics of the course consists of using a very simple technological infrastructure; it is a platform available free of charge on the Internet (URL: www.nicenet.org) which is an environment for the management of interactions and the sharing of resources
- the general approach is centred on the social group which collaborates with the aim of evaluating the relational dynamics
- the educational material supplied can be updated by the students
- the course provides various work activities; therefore, there is both individual study, and sharing and co-operation
- the use of a strategy oriented, above all, to create a climate of collaboration in line with a constructivist approach
- the role of the tutor must be progressively reduced since the aim is that of encouraging peer to peer collaboration
- reflecting on the educational activity offered when the course is finished.

With regards to the platform used, Internet Classroom Assistant (Nicenet) makes asynchronous technologies available which allow the user to define the subjects to discuss and to open a web forum for each of these; to be able to define a memorandum book which is also published on the homepage of the site; to be able to exchange messages so that they are visible to the entire class or to a part of it; to be able to share various kinds of files; to be able to share links to net resources.

The secretarial functions necessary for the proper functioning of the course were carried out by the tutor, who took on the responsibility of managing communication via e-mail with the students and monitoring the activities carried out by the students. Some things which were lacking, that is, not supplied by Nicenet, were the possibility of keeping a diary of the activities, the possibility of obtaining tables which reported, for example, the degree of participation of each student in the discussions and their respect of the deadline in carrying out a task.

In order to avoid the students suddenly finding themselves in a completely new learning situation, the actual online course was preceded by a lesson in which the students were physically present during which the tutor introduced all the educational activity offered from the point of view of the context of CMC (Computer Mediated Communication) emphasizing the fact that, in the virtual class, there would be collective interactions opening the space for constructing a work community in which the relationship with the others, the exchange and the integration of contributions assume an important role and furnish unmistakable social description to this educational modality.

From the point of view of learning, during the lesson in which the students were physically present, the attention of the course attendees was drawn to the fact that CMC allows the subject a more dynamic role in the active construction of his own knowledge. Moreover, the program and the organisation of the course were discussed as were the operating modalities of the collaborative work, and the rules of netiquette through the analysis of the "dossier of the student", specially prepared for the students to help them navigate through what is, for most of them, a new form of learning. Finally, much attention was given to the aspects of methods relative to the timing, through the preparation of an appropriate calendar of the activities since the online course plays on two elements which apparently contradict each other: the "rigidity" of the times of the various activities and the "flexibility" of studying since the course attendee studies when he wants (Trentin, 2001, p. 184).

The course was subdivided into the following phases: documentation, sharing and collaboration. The documentation phase has an individual character, and consists of the studying and analysis, by each student, of the bibliographical material indicated by the tutor relative to some topics about criminological sciences. To be exact, the documentation phase includes the in-depth study of the theoretical approaches of various criminologists and the analysis of some issues relative to criminology applied to security, investigation and the prevention of victimisation. Owing to the particular interest of the selected topics as a didactic resource in the educational training for the students of the online course, I believe the three fundamental requirements indicated by Draves were respected; in fact, crucial information (material which "has to be read"), important information (material that "they should read") and enjoyable information (material that "could be read") were all dealt with (Draves, 2000, p. 99).

In the second phase, the sharing instrument is a web forum during which the course attendees, with minimal participation as predefined by the tutor, advance proposals, and exchange ideas and opinions about the topic which is the object of discussion. The web forum is therefore to be considered as a virtual learning space in which it is possible to check the active and knowledgeable participation of the members of

the learning community (Calvani, Rotta, 2000, p. 149). In this phase, some course attendees were designated to carry out particular roles, that is, proposal leader, the summarizing leader and the expert of the link sharing section. In particular, the proposal leader is the student who had the task of identifying the main topics which, in the web forum, were the object of discussion. In their own data processing, the proposal leaders also asked the virtual class some questions with the aim of suggesting useful ideas for reflection. On the basis of the contributions supplied by the course attendees in the web forum, the summarizing leaders prepared final data which, in this way, has the aspect of real organised and collaborative work. The experts of the link sharing section had the task of pointing out the Internet sites relative to the topics under discussion, which they thought could represent useful in-depth study for the virtual class. These indications had to be accompanied by a logical summary of the content of the sites and, moreover, they had to concentrate on what motivated their choices.

In the third phase, that of collaboration, the effectiveness of the net increases and moves up to a level of collaborative planning; the course attendees, after selecting a topic from those proposed by the tutor, try to develop it together counting on one figure of co-ordination chosen among peers. The final result is a research paper which will be discussed with the tutor during the final oral examination.

Preliminary to this phase, the co-ordinators of the research groups (8-10 people per group) were named: they took care of organising the collaborative activities and writing up the final paper using the contributions of each member of their own group and subjecting it to the critical examination of each colleague.

The sequence of the phases on the basis on which the course was articulated refer to some main modalities through which the Internet assumes importance for the education, and more precisely: for access to information, communication and organised and collaborative work.

Access to information means using the Internet to reach informative materials found in remote computers, the area in which the various strategies for finding information and for learning acquire pedagogical interest. Such a modality was applied during the online course through the development of an activity called *link sharing*.

The next dimension, communication, is correlated to the use of the Internet as a communicative medium, that is, as a channel through which two or more subjects interact. E-mail and web forums are the basic instruments of the entire telematic framework; they are instruments used during the course and defined by the Nicenet site as, for example, *personal messages* and *conferencing*.

Finally, the last dimension, the most important for educational goals, is relative to the organised and collaborative work which involves the passage from personal computing to interpersonal computing, according to Winograd and Flores (Winograd, Flores, 1987). In this way, the main importance of technology as an environment for the creation of a consensual and co-operative dominion of interactions with the aim of reaching a social construction of knowledge is emphasized. This last modality was also applied to the online course under discussion through the activities carried out in the *conferencing* section (web forum).

The articulation of the course as planned corresponds substantially to the typologies of approach to the didactic issues faced in the literature on e-learning. The first phase of documentation is oriented to the contents and is more centred on the key figure of the tutor who selected and distributed the subject matter; in the second phase of sharing, the attention was mainly on the role of the course attendees. Finally, in the third phase of collaboration, the students operated as a peer-to-peer group, facing various difficulties; the focus tends to move to planning, and the approach is typically learning-team-centered (Calvani, Rotta, 2000, p. 289).

The role of the tutor

In the online courses required in an undergraduate course for "Security and Social Control Operators", my role was that of teacher/tutor; it was a complex and exacting but very exciting task.

The duties I carried out, as indicated by Paulsen (Paulsen, 1995), can be subdivided into three large areas: organisational, social and conceptual.

From the organisational point of view, above all I chose the technological platform to use taking into consideration the necessary technical requirements so that the activities could proceed without obstacles, given the heterogeneous computer science competence of the participants. Always in computer science field, I helped the participants solve problems of a technical nature which gradually appeared during the development of the course. Then, I carried out some "administrative" functions; as an example, all the activities connected to: 1) the preparation of complete always updated lists of the students with the references necessary in order to maintain contact with them; 2) as mentioned before, the drawing up of the calendars of the activities and the expiration dates to be respected; 3) explanation of the precise rules of participation and behaviour.

Regarding the three phases into which the course was subdivided (documentation, sharing, collaboration), I performed the abovementioned activities mostly in the first phase, that is, documentation. In the other two phases, the organisational tasks were mainly realized in monitoring and evaluating activities; for example, checking the e-mail daily, compiling and maintaining an updated summary of the threads of discussion which were carried out in the web forum, verifying that the fixed expiration dates were respected, assigning grades (based on thirty: maximum grade 30, minimum passing grade 18).

Relative to this task, I stopped to think about the possible contradiction existing between co-operation and individual evaluation. As time went by, I observed that, in the online activities, the competition between the students was high because they have to be evaluated on the basis of their participation and their online contributions; for example, I was able to notice that similar interventions on the same topics were carried out, interventions that did not offer new information in light of the construction of the common knowledge, but which had, therefore, the mere goal of "being seen" in order to obtain a positive grade from the teacher/tutor.

In my opinion, this took place because some students in the virtual class were not so much concerned with each other's contributions as they were more stimulated by the fact that just one more participation, even if repeated, and therefore superfluous for the aims of collaborative learning, would guarantee them a higher mark.

I evidently took these dynamics into account when evaluating how each course attendee profited from the course, an evaluation which consisted in quantifying the quality, on the basis of the content analysis of the

interventions on the web forum. Moreover, in order to try to reduce these "distortive" factors during the phase of collaboration, as reported previously, I prepared an activity based on the co-construction of a research paper whose evaluation was collective (that is one grade for each group). In this way, given that each student came to the final oral examination with a background of two grades, one individual and one collective, I tried to render the "conflict of interest" existing between competition/co-operation and individual/collective evaluation as objective as possible. In practice, evaluation in the field of e-learning has induced to me to adopt new conceptual models, no longer evaluating only at the conclusion of the learning process, but carrying it out in *itinere* by means of the appreciation of the quality of the interactions generated during the course as well as the ability to plan and elaborate collective products.

As regards the social tasks, as tutor/moderator, I took care of managing the discussion groups on the web forum bearing in mind that, inside the learning group, the interaction is typically collective, and therefore the tutor is not the point of reference in the educational training program, but is one of many actors. For that reason, I tried to mitigate the tones of the discussion, when it was excessively animated, but above all to stimulate debate, giving the students new ideas for food for thought when the debate showed signs of "fatigue". In this sense, as a tutor/moderator, I concentrated my attention on managing the communicative and relational dynamics. In particular, I was essentially an observer and I took part in the discussions when I thought it opportune with the aim of modifying particular situations as they emerged.

On this subject, it is useful to emphasize "the false antinomy existing in the way the teachers carry out their own role and how they consider the participation of the students: to a more passive role of a student corresponds a more active role of the teacher, and vice versa, to a more active role of the student corresponds, generally, a more passive role of the teacher" (Pascual, Murriello, Suarez, 2000, p. 4).

Finally, in the conceptual tasks, the role of the tutor is that of a facilitator: "the tutor's chief teaching role will probably be more akin to that of facilitator in a learner-centred classroom - engaging the learners in coming to terms with the concepts and taking ownership of them in their own ways" (Rowntree, 1995, p. 4).

Therefore, I took care of illustrating concepts and explaining the contents, proposing integrative study materials and, assisting those who seemed to be in trouble. In other words, it was a question of facilitating the learning of single students, identifying the risk situations early and taking part on the pedagogical/didactics level, helping the subject to overcome momentary difficulties linked to the subject matter, the rhythm and personal situations.

As Rowntree asserts authoritatively, "the social and conceptual roles are not always carried out separately, of course. A single tutor message may contain elements of both, together perhaps with some structural adjustments to the course plan" (Rowntree, 1995, p. 4).

Evaluation of the didactic activity

At the end of each course, I had the goal of carrying out an evaluation of the activities carried out in the terms of "evaluation as a monitoring process" (Calvani, Rotta, 2000, p. 262) in order to collect data with the aim of having aspects emerge which would have had to be eventually improved or modified the year after.

Therefore, I prepared a final questionnaire in order to determine how each student lived his own particular participation in the online course by asking opinions on: the subject matter dealt with in the course, the didactic methods adopted for the running of the course, the organisational aspects, the technical aspects related to the use of the net and the technologies suggested, and the effectiveness of the tutor.

The distribution of the questionnaire was carried out both with presence and online: with physical presence, during the sessions of final examinations, I distributed the paper questionnaire to the students asking them to fill it out and guaranteeing anonymity; instead, for the online distribution, I published the questionnaire in the *documents* section of the Nicenet site, and I created an appropriate user-id in order to enter the site so that each student could compile the questionnaire and send it to me through a net message which also guaranteed the anonymity of the course attendee.

At the end of the first year of the course (2001-2002), I collected 135 questionnaires from the 157 participants (equal to 86%); at the end of the second year (2002-2003), I collected 74 questionnaires from the 131 participants (approximately 57%) and regarding the third year (2003-2004), I collected 89 questionnaires from the 130 participants (68%).

Altogether, the online courses organised in the undergraduate course for "Security and Social Control Operators" have been accepted with enthusiasm and interest by the students.

Moreover, I would like to specify that, also from the point of view of how much the students profited from the course I am satisfied because the average of the evaluations from the course attendees referring to the activities carried out online is about 24/30.

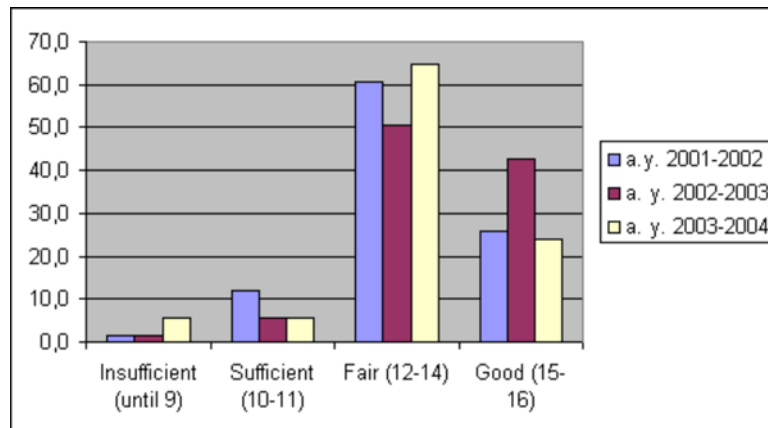
First of all, the following are some socio-demographic notes in order to delineate a profile of the course attendees. The students in question were mostly males (73.1% in 2001-2002, 59.5% in 2002-2003 and 74.2% in 2003-2004), between 20 and 29 years old, who other than being students, also worked (71.6% of the participants in 2001-2002, 68.5% in 2002-2003, and 85.2% in 2003-2004). On this subject, it is important to specify that a large group of students (51.5% in 2001-2002, 43.8% in 2002-2003 and 66.7% in 2003-2004) are already inserted in professions linked to the world of security and social control, carrying out activities such as policemen, "carabiniere", municipal policemen, security managers and private investigators.

As specifically regards the evaluation of the educational activity carried out, almost all the participants judge the subject matter dealt with in the online course as very interesting or fairly interesting (altogether, 95.5% in 2001-2002, 94.5% in 2002-2003, 95.4% in 2003-2004), feel that the teaching methods used for conducting the course itself were very effective or fairly effective (91.1%, 94.5% and 88.5% respectively in the three academic years of activation), evaluate the quality of the organisational aspects of the course during the several didactic activities carried out as good or fair (84.4%, 93.1% and 87.2%) and, finally, consider the technological platform on which the course was based, that is the Nicenet site as very easy or fairly easy to use (96.3%, 99.3% and 100%, respectively).

On the basis of these data collected by means of the first four questions of the questionnaire, and with the aim of estimating the quality of the educational activity of the online course as perceived by the students, I constructed a suitable indicator which gives these judgments a numerical value which can vary from a minimum of 4 (in the case in which the subject matter dealt with in the course was not thought to be interesting at all, the didactic methods used were not effective at all, the quality of the organisational aspects was insufficient and the Nicenet site was very difficult to use) to a maximum of 16 (the opposite:

the subject matter dealt with was very interesting, the teaching methods were very effective, the quality of the organisational aspects was good, and the Nicenet site was very easy to use). I then devised some classes of values on the basis of this indicator. Therefore, the overall quality of the educational online activity can be: insufficient (if the indicator does not exceed a value of 9), sufficient (if the indicator assumes the value of 10 or 11), fair (if between 12 and 14) and good (values of 15 or 16).

As noted before, the results are no doubt gratifying; the majority of the participants judged the course as fairly good and a large group thought it was good (to further clarify this point, the diagram of the obtained values is shown below).



Of course, criticism and difficulties are not lacking.

In fact, percentages of students which cannot be ignored (34.8% in 2001-2002, 29.7% in 2002-2003, 15.7% in 2003-2004) pointed out that they had had some difficulties during this course. However, on the positive side, with the passage of time, this percentage gradually diminishes, decreasing by nearly a third, a sign which could be interpreted as an overall improvement of the quality of the educational online activity offered, also as a result of the meta-reflections, and the consequent "adjustments" carried by the course attendees after each cycle of evaluation.

Most of difficulties, as encountered in the authoritative part of the literature on this subject, can be grouped into three categories: difficulties relative to the lack of technical ability and, in specific case, also linguistic ability; difficulties connected to the lack of ability in accessing the subject matter and understanding it, and difficulties due to the lack of ability in time management (Calvani, Rotta, 2000, p.159).

Difficulties reported on finding PCs in public places having access to the Internet (25% in 2001-2002 and 2003-2004, and about 43% in 2002-2003), understanding how the technological infrastructure on which the course is based course works (10.4%, 8.7%, and 7%), and linguistic understanding of the Nicenet site in English (2.1%, 8.7%, and 14%) belong to the first group.

The second group, that is that relative to the lack of ability in accessing the subject matter and in understanding it, refers to having to confront a new method of studying since the student becomes the actor in a model of learning completely different from that related to physical presence (10.4%, 8.7%, and 14%).

Finally, the difficulties relative to the lack of ability in time management refer, instead, to the complexity of organising the student's time of study and the vast amount of work to do, at times thought to be unrealistic in relation to daily life, and also with reference to other normal obligations connected to attending a University undergraduate course. In fact, the difficulty in respecting the pre-established expiration dates (41.2%, 8.7%, and 7%) and in reconciling the obligations that the online course demands with other University obligations which are notable have been pointed out (6.3% in 2001-2002 and 21.7 in 2002-2003), almost with the intention of emphasizing how educational activity on the net undeservedly took time away from traditional courses evidently thinking it was of inferior rank.

Moreover, a fair percentage of students (35.6%, 25.7%, and 27%) gave the teacher/tutor some suggestions and, to this purpose, it is possible to note that some proposals were, however, connected with the difficulties manifested.

In fact, with reference to the lack of technical and linguistic abilities, there are those who advise bringing improvements, from the technical point of view, to the Internet site (10.4% in 2001-2002), and those who suggest using an Italian language site (6.25% in 2002-2003 and 10% in 2003-2004).

Another proposal in this regard also connected to the difficulties relative to the lack of ability in accessing the subject matter and in understanding it, centred on the request to organise more lessons in physical presence in order to acquire familiarity with the technological platform to be used (8.3% in 2001-2002). It is obvious that the need for face-to-face interaction with an interlocutor "in the flesh" is, in this case, also transferred to the plane of acquiring the elementary technical ability necessary for using the Nicenet site, abilities which, however, can be learned easily and in a short time simply experimenting with the software by themselves.

Always regarding to the lack and the need of an interlocutor, greater participation on the part of the tutor have been requested (6.25% in 2002-2003 and 8.3% in 2003-2004). This can be linked to the fact that the students, used to the context of learning in physical presence, to immediate communication and supported by an oral and emotional apparatus which renders it rich and clear (at least in appearance), to the characteristics of question/answer dynamics, can perceive the invisibility of the tutor as a "form of abandonment", and even think that the subject matter distributed online is more difficult to manage and to assimilate. Thus, the necessity of carrying out more lessons in the classroom for in-depth participation by the teacher/tutor on the themes of the course is manifested (6.3% of the suggestions for 2001-2002 and 6.25% for 2002-2003).

Finally, the most "popular" suggestions are connected to the difficulties relative to time management; 54.2%, 56.3% and 12.5% (respectively for the three academic years of activation) of the suggestions are concentrated on the possibility of rendering the expiration dates more flexible, and, however, farther apart

in time, carrying out the course in two semesters and not only in one, and generally lightening the workload.

A positive note can be seen from the percentages shown above; the students of the last online course organised had much less than the others to ask for improvements in this field; this is probably also due to the fact that, in planning the calendar of activities, we attempted to take into account the difficulties which had emerged and the indications proposed in previous years.

The opinion of the students was asked relative to the percentage to assign to each of the two types of teaching (online and in presence) in a hypothetical undergraduate course, specifying that the sum of the two values had to be 100%. Therefore, those data were grouped into three classes of values: preference for online teaching, preference for teaching requiring physical presence and a situation of parity (50% to online and 50% to physical presence).

This question offered me the possibility of verifying, apart from the evaluation assigned to the online course attended by the students, their interest with respect to the insertion of online teaching in a hypothetical undergraduate course and, if affirmative, in what proportion with respect to traditional teaching methods.

The results showed that the relative majority of the people interviewed, after having had, on the whole, a positive experience participating in an online course, however, continue to orient themselves towards the traditional teaching methods requiring physical presence (47.7% in 2001-2002, 45.1% in 2002-2003 and 46% in 2003-2004). The preference for online teaching is manifested by little more than a third of the students (precisely 36.2%, 39.4% and 34.5%), while the remaining, perhaps to be diplomatic, equalised the two types of teaching methods (16.2%, 15.5% and 19.5%). After processing the frequency with which the various data emerged from the questionnaires, I used a technique of statistical multivariate analysis called analysis of multiple correspondences with the aim of obtaining a view of the profiles of the students of the various online courses in order to be able to concentrate more intensely on the existence of the relationships between some variables which make up the evaluation questionnaire.

In particular, I arrived at the construction of profiles through the use of three variables: the indicator (in classes) relative to the total quality of the educational activity, the percentage (in classes) assigned by the course attendees to each type of teaching (online and physical presence) and the profession (in classes) of the students.

The analyses carried out on the basis of the answers to the questionnaire supplied by the students of the three different years of course allow the outlining of three similar profiles of students definable as traditionalists, diplomats and innovators.

The profile of the traditionalists who were, however, very few in number, includes those subjects who are solely students, who prefer the teaching method requiring physical presence and who evaluated the educational online experience in which they participated as sufficient (in 2001-2002 and 2003-2004) and fair (in the 2002-2003).

The diplomats are those students whose profession does not regard the field of security, investigation or social control, who do not express a downright preference for the two methods of teaching putting them on the same level, and find the quality of the online activity offered fair.

Finally, the innovators are optimistic with respect to new methodologies; in a future University undergraduate course, they would like the teaching to be mostly online. Moreover, they judge the course in which they participated as good and, other than being students, their profession is connected to the field of security, investigation or social control.

Some short comments on these results. First of all, what emerges is a strong link between the type of student and the type of teaching preferred; the full-time student evidently thinks that one of the precise tasks of his own role is to follow the lessons requiring physical presence, while the worker-student considers alternating moments requiring physical presence with online activities profitable or prefers, for the most part, to experience new teaching methods.

It is obvious how much the pupil-teacher interaction typical of the lessons requiring physical presence is central for the full-time students, how much therefore a direct relationship is important. Without doubt, the proximity has deep psychological significance and, as it turns out from the statistical processing carried out for this group of subjects, it cannot find comparable functional substitutes. It is clear that physically going to lessons can also bring into play "forms of identification and affective transference for which proximity and direct feedback could be important trigger factors; being at lessons can satisfy hidden social needs; for example, it can become a way of sanctioning an identity inside a group; the possibility of approaching the teacher even to ask a banal question or obtain a sign of consent, can assume a value of initiatory belonging: I have been recognised (as a student, novice, member of the community, etc.)" (Calvani, Rotta, 2000, p. 22).

On the contrary, it can be hypothesized that worker-students are attracted by online education because they can "take advantage of" one of the crucial factors which gives added value to this system of learning, that is, the saving of time and of money in commuting.

Beside this motivation of a "utilitarian" character, I hope that the students who were defined as innovators glimpsed another factor of force in the educational online activity, that is, that of autonomy, autonomy in identifying and developing their own learning needs, in procuring material and organising, controlling and evaluating learning by themselves (Moore, 1994). In fact, the online course furnishes the possibility of finding personal conditions more suitable for education and again finding some opportune moments for reflection in order to find better conditions for expressing and introducing their own ideas.

My hope is that the students included in the profile of the innovators work in the world of security, investigation and social control, and operate in a social context, such as the present one, characterised by social transformations which continuously generate new possibilities of disorder, conflict and violence. It is obvious that in this field these professionals must be able to know how improve their professionalism autonomously, establishing education and updating as a process which leads to constant growth in order to succeed in dominating the changes by bringing themselves up to date (Bisi, Sette, 2002).

Therefore, I hope that the "innovator students", with far-sightedness, appreciated not only the utilitarian side of the educational online activity, but that they also identified the potentialities to use cyclically during their own professional life.

Appendix: The evaluation questionnaire

The objective of this questionnaire is to collect the opinions of each student about their participation in the educational activity of the online course on criminological topics.

The questionnaire is anonymous and, in order to maintain confidentiality, an appropriate user-id for entering the virtual class to be used for the compilation and the shipment of the same questionnaire was prepared. Please make an X next to the statement which best expresses your convictions.

1) In your opinion, the subject matter discussed during the online course was:

Very interesting; Fairly interesting; Of little interest; Not interesting

2) In your opinion, the teaching methods used during the course were:

Very effective; Fairly effective; Minimally effective; Not effective

3) How do you evaluate the quality of the organisational aspects of the course in developing the various teaching activities (for example, from the point of view of interaction with the co-ordinator of the course, of the readiness in resolving problems, of the type of solutions adopted)?

Good; Fair; Sufficient; Insufficient

4) From the point of view of practical use, the Internet site Nicenet on which the course was based seemed to you:

Very easy to use; Fairly easy to use; Fairly difficult to use; Very difficult to use

5) Did you encounter any difficulties during this online course?

Yes; No

6) If yes, what type of difficulties?

7) Do you have any suggestions?

Yes; No

8) If yes, what are they?

9) According to you, in a University undergraduate course, what percentage should be assigned to each type of teaching method (online and physical presence)?

Online teaching: ___%;

Physical presence teaching: ___%;

TOTAL 100%

SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC DATA:

10) Age (in years): ___

11) Sex: Male; Female

12) Are you working at the moment?

Yes; No

13) If yes, what do you do?

¹ Footnote: It is specified that, on the basis of Article 15 of the didactic Regulations of the Athenaeum of Bologna (available online at: <http://norma.unibo.it>), a University educational credit is "the measure of the work necessary for the student to carry out to accomplish the educational activities prescribed for the attainment of a title of University study" and every credit corresponds to 25 hours of learning, "comprehensive of hours of lessons, practice, laboratory, seminars and other educational activity, comprised in the hours of individual study". With the aim of acquiring the credits corresponding to each educational activity, according to Article 16 of the aforementioned Regulations, the student must pass a written or an oral final examination and such examination requires the student's physical presence.

References

Balloni, A., Bisi, R., Sette, R. (1998). La didattica in criminologia: l'evoluzione di una disciplina e l'esigenza di una professionalità. *Rassegna Italiana di Criminologia*, IX, 1, January, 23-53.

Balloni, A., Sette, R. (edited by) (2000). *Didattica in criminologia applicata. Formazione degli operatori della sicurezza e del controllo sociale*. Bologna: Clueb.

Bisi, R. (1998). Introduction. In Bisi, R. (edited by), *Criminology Teachings from Theory to Professional Training* (p. 7). Bologna: Clueb.

Bisi, R. (2001). *Gabriel Tarde e la questione criminale*. Milano: Franco Angeli.

Bisi, R., Sette, R. (2002), "La preparazione professionale degli operatori della sicurezza e del controllo sociale", Report presented to the Congress organised by the Sociology of Right Section AIS (Italian Association of Sociologists) and by University of Macerata on the topic: "Cultura giuridica e politiche pubbliche in Italia" ("Legal Culture and Public Policies in Italy"), November 28-29-30, Palazzo Torri (Torri's Building).

Calvani, A. (2001). *Educazione, comunicazione e nuovi media*. Torino: Utet.

Calvani, A., Rotta, M. (1999). *Comunicazione e apprendimento in Internet*. Trento: Erikson.

Calvani, A., Rotta, M. (2000). *Fare formazione in Internet*. Trento: Erikson.

Cavedon, A., Calzolari, M. G. (2001). *Come si esamina un testimone*. Milano: Giuffrè.

Chiazzese, G., Lagana, M. R., Luminari, L., Roberti, E. (2000). *Interactive Computer Aided Learning in the Didactic Activities of a Co-operative Virtual Classroom*. EURODL. Available online at: www.eurodl.org.

- De Kerckhove, D. (1998). *Eccoci nell'era delle psicoteologie*. Available online at: www.mediamente.rai.it/home/bibliote/intervis/d/dekerco6.htm.
- Draves, W. (2000). *Teaching online*. River Falls: LERN Books.
- Gulotta, G. (2000). *Psicologia forense minorile*. In Gulotta G. (edited by), *Elementi di psicologia giuridica e di diritto psicologico* (pp. 919-967). Milano: Giuffrè.
- Gulotta, G. (2000). *La vittima*. In Gulotta G. (edited by), *Elementi di psicologia giuridica e di diritto psicologico* (pp. 1125-1153). Milano: Giuffrè.
- Johannesen, T., Eide, E. M. (2000). *The role of the teacher in the age of technology: Will the role change with the use of Information and communication technology in education?*. EURODL. Available online at: www.eurodl.org.
- La Barbera, D. (2001). *Infonauti alla deriva: il tech abuse di Internet e dei mondi virtuali*. In Di Maria, F., Cannizzaro S. (edited by), *Reti telematiche e trame psicologiche* (pp. 43-68). Milano: Franco Angeli.
- Lyon, D. (1997). *L'occhio elettronico*. Milano: Feltrinelli.
- Maragliano, R. (edited by) (2004). *Pedagogie dell'e-learning*. Roma-Bari: Laterza.
- McPherson, M., Baptista, Nunes, M. (2004). *The Role of Tutors as a Integral Part of Online Learning Support*. EURODL. Available online at: www.eurodl.org.
- Moore, G. M. (1994). *Autonomy and interdependence*. Available online at: www.ed.psu.edu/acsde/ajde/ed82.asp.
- Murchu, D., Korsgaard, Sorensen, E. (2004). *Online Master Communities of Practice: Collaborative Learning in an Intercultural Perspective*. EURODL. Available online at: www.eurodl.org.
- Nacamulli, R. (edited by) (2003). *La formazione il cemento e la rete*. Milano: Etas.
- Pascual, L., Murriello, A., Suarez, M. A. (2000). *Teaching and learning at a distance: Opinions of tutors and students*. EURODL. Available online at: www.eurodl.org.
- Paulsen, M. F. (1995). *An overview of CMC and the online classroom in distance education*. In Berge, Z. L., Collins, M. P. (edited by), *Computer mediated communication and the online classroom*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Rekkedal, T., Qvist-Eriksen, S. (2004). *Support Services in E-learning - an Evaluation Study of Students' Needs and Satisfaction*. EURODL. Available online at: www.eurodl.org.
- Rowntree, D. (1995). *The tutor's role in teaching via computer conferencing*. Available online at: <http://iet.open.ac.uk/pp/D.G.F.Rowntree/Supporting%20online.htm>.
- Santinello, M., Gonzi, P., Scacchi, L. (1998). *Le paure della criminalità. Aspetti psicosociali di comunità*. Milano: Giuffrè.
- Sette, R. (1998). *Courses in Criminology in different parts of the world*. In Bisi, R. (edited by), *Criminology Teachings from Theory to Professional Training* (pp. 24-29, 33-47). Bologna: Clueb.
- Sette, R. (2000). *L'attività seminariale nell'ambito del corso di diploma universitario per "operatore della sicurezza e del controllo sociale"*. In Balloni, A., Sette, R. (edited by), *Didattica in criminologia applicata. Formazione degli operatori della sicurezza e del controllo sociale* (pp. 105-126). Bologna: Clueb.
- Sutherland, E. H. (1987). *Il crimine dei colletti bianchi*. Milano: Giuffrè.
- Sutherland, E. H., Cressey, D. R. (1996). *Criminologia*. Milano: Giuffrè.
- Tait, A., Mills, R. (1999). *The convergence of distance and conventional education: Patterns of flexibility for the individual learner*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Trentin, G. (2001). *Dalla formazione a distanza all'apprendimento in rete*. Milano: Franco Angeli.
- Winograd, T., Flores, F. (1987). *Calcolatori e conoscenza*. Milano: Mondadori.