# eLearning and Continuing Education in Healthcare: the Hospitalitas Project

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**Abstract:** The aim of Hospitalitas (Healthcare Online Shared Platform for Increasing Tessin And Lombardy Immigrant Treatment and ASsistance) is to create an online platform for the continuing education on the assistance of immigrant patients coming form non-western cultures.
The mission of the project is to teach medical staff about cultures and values, and make them aware that this knowledge helps in treating foreign people in a more appropriate and respectful way. This paper tries to answer to the following question: what is the added value of using eLearning? Three main answers to this essential question have been found: the pedagogical value of a combined use of media; the importance of just-in-time learning; the importance of online communication tools in order to create a community of practice between Swiss and Italian healthcare operators. These three points will be investigated and developed in the main part of the paper.

## General Information About the Project

The aim of the Hospitalitas (Healthcare Online Shared Platform for Increasing Ticino And Lombardy Immigrant Treatment and Assistance - www.hospitalitas.net) project is to create an online platform for the continuing education of healthcare professionals that operate in Ticino (Southern Switzerland) and in the border area of Lombardy (provinces of Varese and Como, Italy); the platform wants to assist medical staff in the treatment of immigrant patients coming from non-western cultures (Cantoni, Tardini, Bachmann 2003).
The project has been funded by a program of the European Union called Interreg Program IIIA, which aims at improving the collaboration in the border areas of different countries. For this reason, the Hospitalitas project has two leading partners, an Italian and a Swiss one. The leading partner for the Italian part is I.Re.F. (Istituto Regionale Lombardo di Formazione per l'Amministrazione Pubblica); the Swiss leading partner is the NewMinE Lab (New Media in Education Laboratory) of the School of Communication Sciences of the University of Lugano. Other partners from the Italian side are the hospitals of Como (Azienda Ospedaliera S. Anna) and Varese (A.O. Macchi) and from the Swiss side the Scuola Superiore per le Formazioni Sanitarie (SSFS) and the Centro Documentazione e Ricerca dell'Organizzazione Sociopsichiatrica Cantonale.
Hospitalitas started in January 2003, and will end in December 2005.

## The Mission and the Vision of the Project

The mission of the project is to teach medical staff about non-European cultures and values, and make them aware that this knowledge helps to treat foreign people in a more appropriate and respectful way. Thus, Hospitalitas aims first of all at increasing the awareness of the importance of intercultural communication in healthcare settings;

secondly, at promoting suitable knowledge and competences among healthcare professionals in order to foster intercultural communication; finally, at using for these purposes appropriate eLearning activities.

Due to their high economic and industrial development, Lombardy and Ticino are high migration flow areas with people coming from developing countries such as African, Asian or East European countries. As an example, in Ticino 25% of the resident population is foreign. The greatest number of immigrants – Italy excluded – comes from the area of the ex-Yugoslavian countries, with about 13'000 immigrants in Ticino (about 4.3% of the whole population).

These migration flows cause some problems both to Lombardy and Ticino. One matter of concern is how to give healthcare assistance to these patients: they come from countries which have extremely different cultural, economic, political and healthcare standards, and when they need health assistance, often the healthcare operators are not enough experienced to treat them in a proper way.

This setting needs the support of a learning environment that trains health professionals to handle situations with people from different cultures. Hospitalitas offers with its three modules a complete overview of the statistical data, the theory about intercultural communication and healthcare, and a section where some fictitious situations are presented.

## The Courses and the Modules

The online platform will contain different courses and some related databases; the courses will be delivered periodically to different categories of healthcare operators, while the databases will be always available online. Communication tools will be available as well.

Two different types of courses will be produced: an introduction course, which is addressed to all healthcare operators, and in-depth courses, which are addressed to specific categories of healthcare operators, such as nurses, midwives, etc. The introduction course has the function of making the healthcare operators aware of the importance of intercultural communication by outlining the issue in its different facets. The in-depth courses will be customized on the specific needs of the categories.

The content has been structured into three modules:

1. The first module deals with demographic and normative issues: it presents the demographic situation of the interested area (Ticino and the provinces of Como and Varese), analyzing the data concerning the attendance of foreign people in the area; it presents and analyzes the data about the hospitalizations of the foreigners in the area; finally, it presents the provisions that rule immigration both in Ticino and in Lombardy (and Italy) and the healthcare attendance to immigrants.

2. The second module deals with the issue of intercultural communication in its different facets, namely the linguistic, psychological, anthropological, cultural and religious ones. This module focuses on the cultural differences in the healthcare context, as for instance the different representation in the different cultures of the concepts of health and illness, diet and nutrition, and similar; how the rites of passage (death, birth, and so on) are represented; and so on.

3. The third module contains some cases that represent fictitious situations of interactions between an Italian speaking doctor/nurse and an immigrant patient; the interaction will then be analyzed in its different facets – biometrical and epidemiological, communicative and linguistic, and so on – in a context of problem-based learning. The fictitious situations will be created from several interviews in which physicians talk about their personal experiences with people from different cultures.

As can be noticed, the three modules have different educational approaches: the first one presents statistical data, the second one contains information about theoretical concepts in the field of communication, cultural and anthropological studies, and the third one presents practical situations which have the aim to create problem-based learning activities.
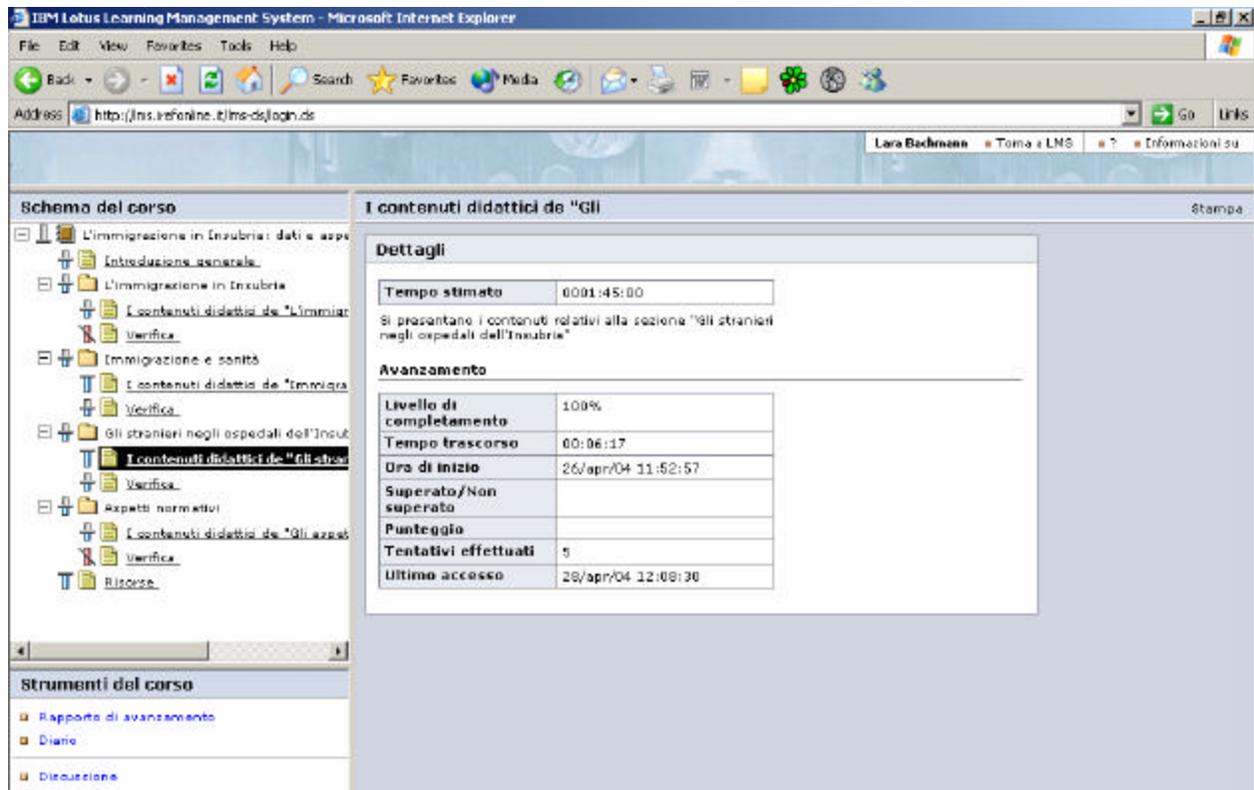
**Figure 1:** a screenshot of the LMS platform

Hospitalitas has been conceived as a blended learning course where in presence meetings and online activities alternate. Two in-presence meetings are foreseen, one at the beginning and one at the end of the course. The online activities include the personal studying of the delivered content as well as online interactions, such as asynchronous discussions with experts or with colleagues.

## Work Progress

The work has been distributed among several teams.
The technological team cared about choosing the most appropriate platform for the course and worked on the course logo and graphics. Learning Management System (IBM) fulfilled all the requirements of the project and was finally chosen among four other platforms (see Figure 1).
The team that cared about the contents started collecting data about the attendance of immigrants in the hospitals of Como, Varese and in the Canton Ticino, in order to create the content for the first module. The collected data have been elaborated and a final structure for the course modules has been created.

**Figure 2:** a screenshot of the course contents (normative issues)

Local healthcare experts who lived experiences with foreign and immigrant patients have been interviewed. These precious interviews will be used as the basis for creating the content of the third module.

In order to be able to assign credits to the Italian healthcare professionals who will attend the course, a proposal has been done to the national program of Continuing Medical Education (E.C.M) from the Italian Ministry of Health, the program that decides how many points (or credits) can be assigned to a continuing medical education course.

Up to now the general structure of the introduction course has been outlined and its first module has been developed. A test phase on the first module (see Figure 2) has been conducted in April 2004 with 20 users (10 from Italy, 10 from Switzerland); in the end of May 2004 the course will evaluated and refined. The participants will be asked to complete a questionnaire which will help us to continue the elaboration of the course and to improve it. In June 2004 the results of this test phase will be available.

## The Technological Tools

In order to provide a high quality course, a platform was needed that could cover all the requirements of the project. The technological team analysed five platforms among which Learning Management System (Lotus LMS by IBM, version 1.0.2.) was chosen, which is compatible with I.Re.F. servers that use IBM technologies. This platform provides a big variety of options and tools (modules) which all belong to the same system. It has a user-friendly interface which is available in 16 languages (among which also Italian).

The implementation of the course's sites is possible through a software called the IBM Lotus LMS Authoring Tool (see Figure 3), which can be used to create or modify course content and evaluations and import them into the LMS. All content formats compatible with the web can be loaded on the platform, what allows to fully customize the contents. The tool collects texts, media and HTML files needed for the course and packages the files into a single ZIP file. The LMS Server imports the package and extracts the course files in the correct directories. The Authoring Tool is already integrated in LMS.

This software offers many interesting features. When a new course is being created, one can choose among several layouts which are already provided by IBM, or create his/her own one (Ebbers et alii 2003).

On the left side of the program window (see Figure 2), one can see the structure of the course with the single pages, their type (menu, text area, image and text, and so on) and the navigation. This way, it is easy to jump from one page to another and choose one to work on. The course will automatically contain a navigation bar; clicking on the "next" button in the course contents, one automatically goes to the next page created inside the structure window.

On the right side one can see the page s/he is implementing. It is possible to directly type inside the text areas, or copy-paste from a document or an HTML file maintaining the same text format (same fonts, sizes, colors, etc.). While working, it is possible to preview the whole course to see the results also in a browser window.

In order to communicate and share our work, we decided to use the Microsoft Messenger, which allows us to have videoconferences, to transfer files, to chat and this way avoid transportation costs. For a future use we are testing an asynchronous collaboration tool called "Lotus QuickPlace", a web-based solution which provides teams with safe workspaces where they can reach consensus through discussions, collaborate on documents and coordinate plans, tasks and resources.
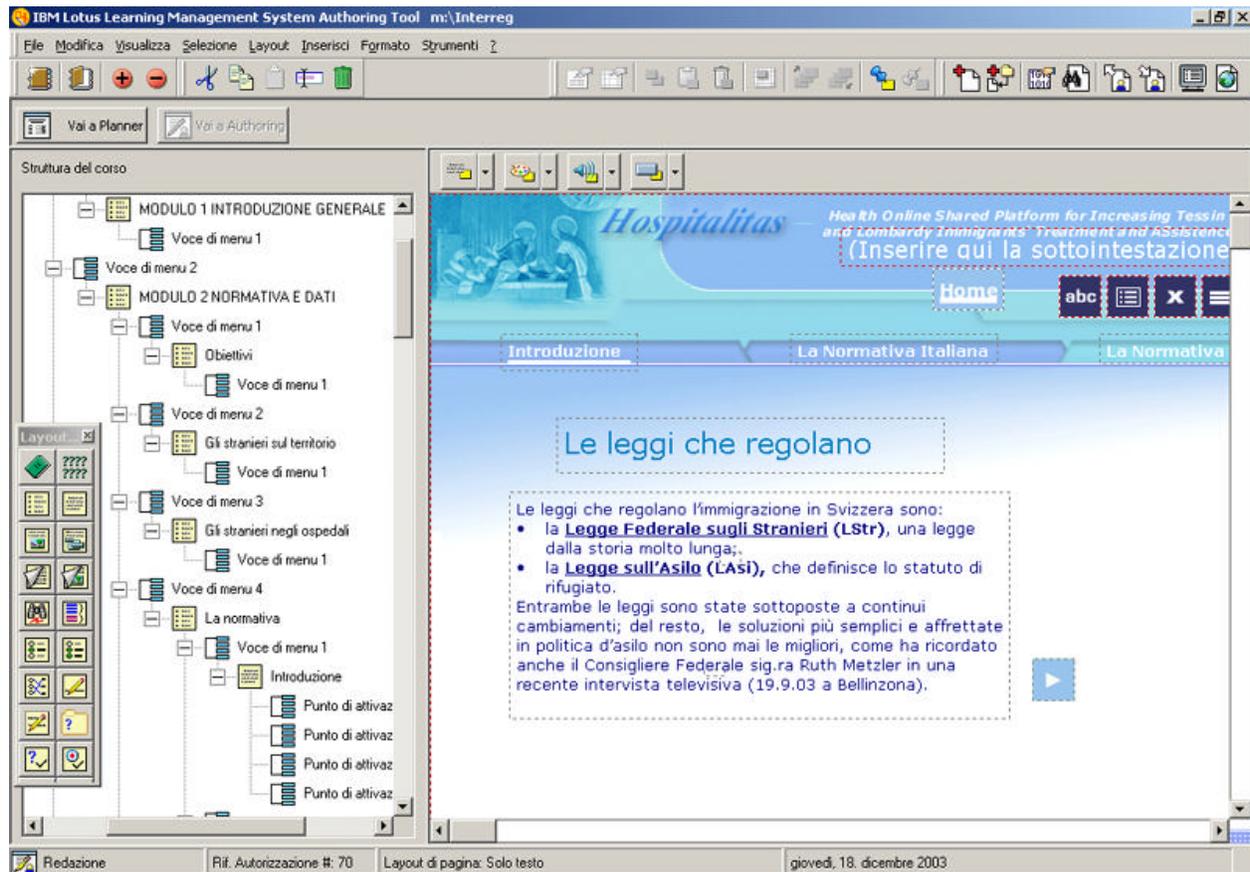


**Figure 3:** a screenshot of LMS Authoring Tool and a part of the course structure

## Conclusions: why eLearning? What is the Added Value of Using eLearning for a Course Like Hospitalitas?

In the healthcare context eLearning has the advantage of fostering the integration of continuing medical education activities into the broader context of eHealth, and of allowing a larger flexibility of access to education.

In the particular case of the Hospitalitas project, we can identify three main reasons for using eLearning activities to foster intercultural communication in a healthcare context:

1. The pedagogical value of a combined use of media. The platform, for instance, will offer a database containing audio files where the most frequent expressions of the doctor – patient interactions (e.g.: "Indicate where it hurts most"; "Are you in pain now?"; "Could you take these tablets please?"; and so on) will be recorded in different languages; the database will always be available on the platform in order to let the files be used just-in-time. Moreover, some videos will be inserted in the courses, in the places where their use has didactical relevance.
2. The importance of just-in-time learning. Some modules and some databases will always remain at the healthcare operators' disposal, in order to allow them to look up the necessary information when needed.

For instance, while examining a patient who can not speak Italian, the doctor will be able to access the database with the linguistic expressions and to communicate with the patient.

3. The importance of online communication tools for the creation of a community of practice between Swiss and Italian healthcare operators. This is one of the main goals of the project. Online communication tools, both synchronous and asynchronous such as discussion forums or e-mail, dramatically improve chances of exchanging information, sharing experiences and trying to solve common problems. Of course, the in presence meetings serve this purpose all the more so.

## References

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