Il contributo intende confrontare, dal punto di vista storico, pedagogico e politico, due modelli organizzativi che hanno contraddistinto l'ambito dell'apprendimento a distanza mediato dalle tecnologie. Il primo, affermatosi con forza con la nascita della Open University nel 1969, fa riferimento a un più ampio concetto di apertura, che poi negli anni '90, con il progressivo spostamento del focus sul discente e sul processo di apprendimento, ha preso il nome di Open Distance Learning, facendosi forte anche di un sostegno a livello istituzionale da parte della Commissione Europea che lo ha promosso con uno specifico Memorandum nel 1991. Dal punto di vista organizzativo, proprio questa centrazione sul discente richiede una particolare attenzione ed esplicitazione del processo in quanto il dispositivo didattico deve prendersi la responsabilità del singolo discente nel quadro di una complementarità e complessità degli strumenti coinvolti. Il contributo evidenzia quindi come, fra il 1999 e il 2001 la stessa Unione Europea abbia preferito orientarsi verso un altro modello, quello dell'e-learning, risultante da tutt'altre premesse, in particolare quelle inerenti l'economia digitale e i principi di qualità propri del mondo delle organizzazioni, come il miglioramento continuo e la soddisfazione del cliente, allontanandosi dunque dall'approccio precedente, pedagogicamente più significativo. In conclusione, i fenomeni riconducibili a questo cambio di strategia, che ha in primo luogo interessato l'ambito dell'apprendimento a distanza, si stanno ripercuotendo oggi nel contesto universitario più generale.

**Parole chiave:** open distance learning, e-learning, politiche europee, ICT

**Keywords:** open distance learning, e-learning, european policy, ICT

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In this essay we will focus on the difference between two approaches that have characterized the issue of Distance Education. The first one is the approach of Open Distance Learning (according to the Italian/French tradition: Formazione Aperta a Distanza/Formazione Ouverte à Distance), conceptually born between 1969 and 1971 with the foundation of the UK Open University, and promoted by the European Commission during the Nineties. The second one is the "e-learning" approach, which started during the 1998-2000 "dotcom bubble". A lexical simplification took place in 2001, when the term "e-learning" was adopted by the European Commission itself, and commonly used as if both terms referring to Distance Education were synonymous. Our aim is, however, to show that the two phrases are substantially different in their origin, their premises and also in their consequences regarding the organizational dimension.


Although some important experiences of Distance Education had been present since the end of XIX century, the foundation of the UK Open University in 1969 represents an important step in the evolution of the Distance Education domain. Besides the technological aspects that are often immediately perceived, we think that the crucial issue was precisely the link between the distance element and a broader concept of openness. As the chancellor Lord Crowther said during the formal inauguration meeting in 1969, "We are open as to people, as to places, as to methods, as to ideas," recalling the major historical changes happening in Europe in the late Sixties, that enlarged the audience concerned with Higher Education.

We think that it is important to notice that it took two years from the foundation of the UK Open University (1969) to activate the first courses (1971); that is because, when preparing a distance education course, "nulla può essere lasciato all'intuizione". Due to its very nature, the teaching process must be entirely designed before it actually comes into play, often with the help of several professionals working together. We can already see how organizational issues were essential. Moreover, the Open University applied some basic principles of educational de-

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143 The Open University was known at that time as a "television university" (D. Palomba, Open University, La Nuova Italia, Firenze 1975) and the technological element often takes advantage of a "positive halo" (B. Vertecchi, Eppur si muove, in IaD – Istruzione a Distanza, a. III, n. 1, 1991, p. 3).
144 We can refer to the Open University website. The full text can be found on the Internet, although in July 2015, through the Web Archive Wayback Machine: web.archive.org/web/20130531043246/http://www.col.org/SiteCollectionDocuments/Daniel_CROWTHER_Speech_1969.pdf
145 Palomba, Open University, cit., p. 56.
The association between Open Learning and Distance Learning was then promoted at institutional level by the European Commission in 1991, via a specific Memorandum on Open Distance Learning (ODL), influential throughout the Nineties. We can identify an ideal moment of maturation of the ODL debate in the Consensus Conference of Chasseneuil in France in 2000. We often refer to it, even if its bearing was only French, because of two main elements:

- The method: the Consensus Conference, imported from the medical context, gathers some experts or organizations involved in a domain that needs to be better defined. At Chasseneuil, about 20 French experts participated in a 4-month period of studies which led to a 3-day conference, and a final document we will cite shortly; this is therefore a bottom-up initiative, coming from actual working practices;

- The date: the final conference took place in Chasseneuil on March 27-29, 2000, the same year and month of the Lisbon European Council to which we will refer in a following paragraph of this essay.

Regarding the content of the document, it mainly highlights the organizational issues; the title itself focuses on the *accompagnement pédagogique et organisationnel*, while the ODL definition coming from the consensus conference is the following:

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Une Formation Ouverte et A Distance est un dispositif organisé, finalisé, reconnu comme tel par les acteurs, qui prend en compte la singularité des personnes dans leurs dimensions individuelle et collective et repose sur des situations d'apprentissage complémentaires et plurielles en termes de temps, de lieux, de médiations pédagogiques humaines et technologiques, et de ressource.\footnote{Ivi, p. 4.}

As we see above, the organizational issues were important in the Open University courses as well, but this is even more true when the educational focus moved from teaching to learning from the Nineties on. Sidir and Cochard\footnote{M. Sidir, G.-M. Cochard, Méthodes et outils de gestion en e-formation, in I. Saleh, S. Bouyahi (eds.), Enseignement à distance: épistémologie et usages, Hermès-Lavoisier, Paris 2004, pp. 93-114.}, interpreting the Chasseneuil definition, underline how "l'organisation se doit d'être explicite" in ODL as it must take the responsibility for the individual learner together with the complementarity of the educational tools, which corresponds to greater complexity.

They therefore speak about a third dimension – the organizational dimension – to be added to the educational and technological ones, maybe the most obvious ones in speaking about educational devices that make wide use of technology. Such attention on these two elements was stressed at the beginning of 2000 by a major lexicon change that imposed a new phrase – e-learning – on the public debate, containing both (learning, and "e" that stands for "electronic"). While the organizational aspects, according to Sidir and Cochard, were linked to the learner centered nature of the device, this was not the main issue coming from this newly defined domain, as we shall see in the next paragraph.


Although we cannot identify an official birthdate for e-learning, we can nonetheless focus on October 20 1999, when the US consultant, Elliott Masie, anticipated in the "Techlearn" Newsletter he led, the gist of his speech in the Tech-Learn conference (October 31 – November 3 1999). We think that the incipit of his contribution was significant to understand what was happening in those years:

*Business is adding the letter "e" in front of a lot of words in the last year of the 1900's. e-commerce, e-business, e-shopping, e-transactions, and now e-learning. The "e" has come to stand for a Digital Age and internet focused transformation of a business process. "e" literally means the "electronic" personification of a commerce, shopping or learning. But, it also means modern, internet age, "venture capital friendly" and on-line.\footnote{E. Masie, The "e" in e-learning stands for "E"xperience, in «TechLearn TRENDS», Special report, Oct. 20, 1999, trends.masie.com.}
The use of e-learning arose within the dotcom bubble, based on the overestimation of the possibilities of ICT. We must say that in this period, the importance of information and knowledge within the organizations was strongly underlined ("information society" or "knowledge society" were terms commonly used). In order to highlight the great difference between the premises of e-learning and the ODL, we quote here another definition of the same period: "e-learning is a strategy that encompasses and utilizes today's technologies to satisfy business drivers". E-learning is seen as a component of a broader phenomenon, called e-business (how ICT could help to satisfy business drivers): more than an organizational dimension of an educational device, we can see here an educational dimension of an organizational device!

From a lexicon point of view, we witnessed an extreme simplification, shown by quoting the second paragraph of Elliott Masie's article:

"e-learning" is a great phrase, as it is a wider tent than just on-line learning, web-based training, CBT, technology assisted, distance learning or other phrases.

The US consultant considered this simplification in a positive way, not caring about the different origins, premises and traditions of each phrase he puts "in his wider tent". Even if he intended to remove the technological meanings from the e-learning phrase (he says that "the 'e' of e-learning stands for experience": that was the actual title of his article, as well as its main focus), the strong financial and economic implications were so powerful that some years passed before the educational literature took widely on the responsibility for managing this new phase of distance education evolution.

As a counterbalance, we can in fact quote Luciano Galliani:

Il termine 'e-learning' [...] oggi tanto di moda e diffuso, è l'ultimo ritrovato di fine millennio del semplificatorio lessico americano, accettato purtroppo dalla stessa cultura europea, che

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155 E. Masie, op. cit.

pure aveva elaborato per tutti gli anni '90 un proprio costrutto (ODL – Open Distance Learning) pedagogicamente più significativo\textsuperscript{157}.

Besides the difference of approach to the same phenomenon between the US consultant and the Italian pedagogist, we notice how Galliani refers to Open Distance Learning, saying, in 2003, that European culture accepted e-learning in its place. What happened then?

The turning point was, of course, the European Council that took place in Lisbon on March 23-24 2000, when the EU leaders decided to set a main strategic goal, to turn the European economy into the "most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world"\textsuperscript{158}. This influenced the EU policies for the next decade at least. Many educational researchers quoted this sentence, but only a few underlined its meaning and origin: the knowledge-based economy is actually strongly influenced by the dotcom bubble, the "new economy", based on the ICT innovations coming from the rapid evolution and diffusion of internet and the World Wide Web\textsuperscript{159}.

The choice of the name used to indicate the subsequent European action plan is even more significant — eEurope!\textsuperscript{160} as it reminds us of Masie’s incipit ("Business is adding the letter 'e' in front of a lot of words"), and therefore the influence of the dotcom bubble is absolutely explicit. The point is that, when the Lisbon European Council took place (2000, March 23-24), the dotcom bubble had already exploded, as conventionally the bursting point is located on March 10 2000, when the NASDAQ index reached its peak. So the strategic goal that would influence the EU policies for a decade was founded on premises that had changed even before the strategic document was approved.

As far as we are concerned in this paper, we therefore stress that the use of the phrase Open Distance Learning, promoted by the EU institutions in the early Nineties and reaching a certain degree of maturity in the same month of the Lisbon European Council (the Chasseneuil Conference March 27-29 2000), was abandoned in favour of the e-learning phrase, more coherent to the new approach. In fact, within the eEurope action plan we cited above, the European Commission prepared and launched a more specific one, the eLearning action plan, published in 2001, definitively adopting this phrase.


\textsuperscript{159} In the Lisbon document, there are several references to a digital economy. For example: "The shift to a digital, knowledge-based economy, prompted by new goods and services, will be a powerful engine for growth, competitiveness and jobs" (European Council, op. cit.,par. 8).

\textsuperscript{160} Ibidem.
The eLearning\textsuperscript{161} definition contained in that action plan is now wellknown and is often quoted in the specialized literature:

\textit{the use of new multimedia technologies and the Internet to improve the quality of learning by facilitating access to resources and services as well as remote exchanges and collaboration}\textsuperscript{162}.

We highlight here the reference to the improvement in the quality of learning. We think this is not a coincidence: the Nineties, beyond being the ODL decade, were also the Quality decade, in particular the Total Quality Management approach decade\textsuperscript{163}. Within the Lisbon Strategy, based on the digital economy, and therefore, as we said above, on the use of technology mainly to improve business drivers, we can argue that referring to quality improvement actually means referring to a specific organizational business model, focusing mainly on continuous improvement and customer satisfaction. As further proof of this fact, several projects addressing quality in e-learning set out from the eLearning Action Plan\textsuperscript{164}.

While speaking of the organizational dimension of e-learning, we should then move from the Information Society and from the Knowledge Society issues, to focus on quality models imported from the organizations’ studies; we will therefore address customer satisfaction rather than learner centration, which was the main point of the Open Distance Learning organizational dimension, as we said above. Learner centration and customer satisfaction may actually converge in some cases, but of course are not the same concept, all the more so because the learner may not correspond to the customer\textsuperscript{165}.

3. CONCLUSIONS

Looking at today’s University, even the traditional classroom-based one, we can find several consequences of this change of strategy. The quality issue, addressed by e-learning from the very beginning, now concerns Higher Education.

\textsuperscript{161} In the action plan, the "e" was in italics and there is no hyphen (that was the same for eEurope). We will use that spelling while referring to those documents, while we will use "e-learning" otherwise.

\textsuperscript{162} European Commission, \textit{The eLearning Action Plan. Designing tomorrow’s education}, 28/03/2001,


\textsuperscript{164} Namely, the EQO, QUAL-E-LEARNING, SEEL and SEEQUEL projects, which contributed to the creation of the European Foundation of Quality in E-Learning (EFQUEL).

\textsuperscript{165} See for example chapter 9 in A. Calvani, M. Rotta, \textit{Fare formazione in Internet. Manuale di didattica online}, Erickson, Trento 2000.
as a whole (we are referring particularly to the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* document published by ENQA in 2005 and subsequently approved by the European Higher Education Area ministers responsible for Higher Education, in the Bergen Communiqué in 2005). We are now seeing an excess of accountability caused by many official documents at national level, denoting an extremely procedural quality approach, based mainly at service level rather than at instruction or education level.

The Open Distance Learning phrase may be recalled almost only by researchers focusing on these specific issues: nonetheless, a broader approach to openness is taking place in speaking of Open Educational Resources (OER) and, overall, of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC). This is a major challenge for higher education, as the traditional content-based model will soon be overtaken, as people can access high-quality content supplied by the most prestigious Universities in the world, making it possible to pass an exam to obtain a certification. In our opinion, universities should pay closer attention to the educational issues, giving learners something more than just "content delivery", otherwise the traditional model will no longer be sustainable.

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168 Fiorucci, although referring specifically only to the one concerning the doctorate, qualifies them as being "fragmentary" and "compulsive" (M. Fiorucci, *Il profilo normativo dei dottori di ricerca*, in «Pedagogia Oggi», 1/2014, p. 11).


