INTRODUCTION

The experiences in distance learning are by now countless in the whole world. Notwithstanding the fact that some systems have been improved and enriched with many services (for example, some portals devoted to the distance learning of the English language are noteworthy), as things are today there are no standards acting as an integrated model for the development of other portals.

Most of the portals devoted to distance learning are characterized by elements connected to specific needs, even if the growing offer of distance educational materials originates the need of a better structuring in the proposals of educational formats and integrated services-content models.

The development models are codified in procedures. The activities are economized.

As a rule, the normalization of an activity is preceded by a period of analysis, recognition, identification and evaluation of the instruments, needs, and content. In this context (and in this phase) we classify the present work.

In the first part we individuate the main services constituting the current structure of our portal; in the second part, we examine the user profiles characterizing the use allocation of the same portal; last but not least, in the third part we individuate some application examples with a final mention to the start of a standardization process.

1. THE PORTAL STRUCTURE AND THE INSTRUMENTS FOR COOPERATIVE LEARNING

In this section we show how, starting from a structured and organized collection of materials, with free or guided access, the same collection can be increased with a series of interactive instruments, online evaluation instruments, and cooperative learning functions, so becoming a valuable system for distance learning.

The factor marking the passage from "passive" to "active" learning is determined by the concept of virtual class; this implies, in its turn, the separation of filed materials in courses, managed by teachers and tutors.

The virtual class identifies the group of users participating in the same course and that consequently can accede the same services and resources. Anyway, in any moment an user can be a member of more than one virtual class (according to the number of courses he is attending).

In particular, the services furnishing and broadening the system functions have the following goals:

- To allow an interaction between users and administrators/tutors. This interaction is based on the exchange of messages; on the notification by the tutors/administrators of informations that are useful for the life of the virtual class; as well as on the exchange of materials allowing the teachers/tutors to verify the achievement of set educational goals.
- To allow the interaction between those participating in the same virtual class. Suitable spaces allow the users to talk among them, in real time or with delayed messages, or simply to share the class materials.

Through their subscription to the course, the users can use the following services:

- Chat
- Notice Board
- Forum
- EasyWeb
- Online Quiz
- Media Library

Each course can accede these services in a separate and customized way; that is Notice Board, Chat, etc. can be used irrespective of each course (so there is a chat linked to Course1, another for Course2, etc.).

Here following we describe the services that have been activated.

Chat

This is a service that allows a real time interaction among the people participating in the same virtual class. Through this service, the users can contact the people that in a given moment are connected to the course, and so can exchange messages among them.