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Travelling with the UniOn App: Itineraries of Language and Culture Through the City of Bologna

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ABSTRACT

UniOn is an application for smartphone and tablets developed within ILOCALAPP (www.ilocalapp.eu), a European project coordinated by the University of Bologna. UniOn exists in four versions, one for each city involved in the project (Bologna, Coimbra, Poznań and Rovaniemi), and it is meant to foster the incidental learning of the language and the culture related to the city (respectively, Italian, Portuguese, Polish and Finnish). The fruition and the understanding of the contents (reading, listening, etc.) directly in the places let the users get in touch with aspects of language and culture in an implicit, non intentional way.

UniOn has been created to cope with the specific needs of international students living a mobility experience, but it has become soon an interesting tool also for other typologies of travellers (high-school students, university students coming from other cities, tourists, migrants). In this article we will illustrate the main app features and its development based on a user-centred design approach. We will focus upon the Bologna version of the app to show how the app is being used, and how both the city and the users' experience of the city play a crucial role.

Keywords: Application; Geo-localisation; Integration; Learning; Language-culture

UniOn è un'applicazione per smartphone e tablet sviluppata nell'ambito del progetto europeo ILOCALAPP (www.ilocalapp.eu) coordinato dall'Università di Bologna. UniOn esiste in quattro versioni, corrispondenti alle quattro città coinvolte nel progetto (Bologna, Coimbra, Poznań e Rovaniemi) e ha lo scopo di favorire l'apprendimento

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incidentale di quattro lingue e culture (rispettivamente: italiano, portoghese, polacco e finlandese). La fruizione dei contenuti (lettura, ascolto, ecc.) nei luoghi di riferimento consente agli utenti della app di avvicinarsi agli aspetti di lingua e cultura in modo implicito, non intenzionale.

La app è nata per far fronte alle esigenze specifiche degli studenti in mobilità internazionale, ma è diventata presto fonte di interesse anche per altre tipologie di viaggiatori (studenti delle scuole superiori, universitari fuori sede, turisti, immigrati). In questo contributo illustreremo le caratteristiche principali della app e la sua realizzazione, basata su un approccio di design partecipativo. Il focus sulla versione per Bologna mostrerà dei casi d'uso, in cui svolgono un ruolo cruciale sia la città che l'esperienza della città che vivono gli utenti.

Keywords: Applicazione; Geo-localizzazione; Integrazione; Apprendimento; Lingua-cultura

UniOn is an application for mobile devices developed between October 2015 and August 2018 within ILOCALAPP (www.ilocalapp.eu), a European project coordinated by the University of Bologna (Italy) and carried out in collaboration with a consortium composed by the Adam Mickiewicz University of Poznań (Poland), the University of Lapland in Rovaniemi (Finland), and the Centre for Social Studies of University of Coimbra (Portugal). The contents of UniOn are geo-localised in the four cities of the project (Bologna, Coimbra, Poznań and Rovaniemi) and are meant to help international students (and not only them) to integrate the local context; as such, the app incidentally fosters the learning of the language and the culture related to the city (respectively, Italian, Portuguese, Polish and Finnish).

In this article we will briefly illustrate the main app features and its development based on a user-centred design approach, in which both the city and the users' experience of the city play a crucial role. We will focus upon the Bologna version of the app to show how the app is being used by the original target group of users (the international and mobility students) and how it is becoming more and more interesting also for other typologies of travellers (high-school students, students from other towns of the same country, tourists, migrants).

The contents in the application range from cultural topics to practical issues, along with language information. UniOn contents include both texts and multimedia (audios, animations and videos), as well as links to external resources, services, and web sites (Mirri et al., 2017). The contents are structured in nine categories, the same for the four languages/cultures/cities of the project; and each category is organised in subcategories, similar but not identical in the four versions of the application (Valva et al., 2018).

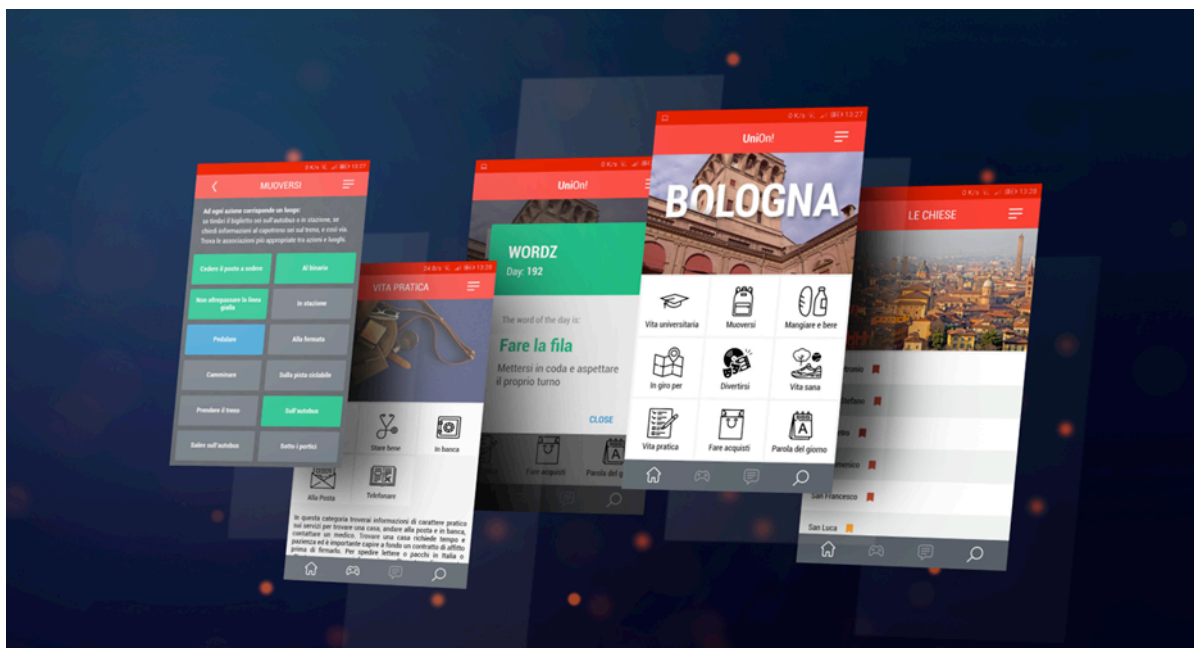


Figure 1: Screenshots of some pages of UniOn Bologna

Source: personal data

UniOn promotes the discovery and the smart understanding of the context through the exploration of the cultural, social and institutional places, and also through the possibility of sharing with the community the experience lived by end-users. UniOn is equipped with geo-localisation and context-awareness functionalities, and the most commonly used mobile applications and social media (e.g. Google Maps and YouTube) are integrated in the app (Mirri et al., 2016). The integration with local reality and the participation of the users in the local life are therefore intrinsic in the nature of the app, which may be explored following three different possible directions of usage: i) by navigating the topics organised in categories and sub-categories; ii) searching for keywords and then selecting the text(s) containing the results and iii) following the notifications linked to the geo-localisation of the places. As UniOn guarantees these diverse modalities of accessing the language and cultural contents, the users are free to follow the approach which mostly fits their needs, and also to change this approach according to the context and the moment.

UniOn is designed to involve the users in an active and autonomous participation of the local life: in fact, contents and functionalities of the application support the users both in interacting with native speakers and in getting more familiar with the hosting reality. In this perspective, UniOn transcends the conventional ideas of language and culture teaching/learning and enhances real and effective communication by supporting the interaction and the integration.

The features of the applications have been outlined after a careful end-users' consultation carried out all along the project. In 2016 a large survey including an online questionnaire, focus groups and experience prototyping sessions was carried out. In 2017 preliminary tests have been conducted in Bologna with the first prototype of the application. In particular, the exploration of selected Points of Interests (POIs) has been successfully exploited (Valva et al., 2018). In total, UniOn Bologna includes 112 POIs; all

of them are linked to a specific informative text, and also to images, videos and audios. The approach to the city heritage is indeed different and unconventional, yet functional and effective.



Figure 2: Some of the POIs included in the app

Source: personal data

The first users of the application declared that UniOn allows for a vivid, enthusiastic discovery of the city from a unique perspective, plunging the travellers living a temporary experience into the local life and helping them overcome any initial feeling of being disoriented. With UniOn a selection of cultural and historical places is offered to the users, along with a set of practical tips to interact, and also the connections with the users' participation and personal appreciation of the experience are exploited. In 2018, once the app was reaching its final configuration, further usage experiences have been observed with different typologies of users. Not only university international students, but also high-school students and tourists have tried to approach the city through the interaction of UniOn. These new users agreed that UniOn opens the path to new forms of exploration: the tool is innovative, the information is accessible, the model is sustainable. In recent months, the scope of users is enlarging, in terms of age, origin, and motivation of the travellers. And also the scope of usage could follow this direction, as the model could be potentially applicable to other cities, languages and cultures.

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