Comparison of Online Platforms for the Review Process of Conference Papers

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Abstract— **Organizing conferences requires the consideration of several aspects, such as the choice of the most appropriate platform to manage the received papers or the conference location, among others. To this goal, we are going to compare some of the most important review platforms, which allow us to host our conferences. In recent years,new systems based on software applications have emerged. This software can be downloaded from the developer websites. These give us more options to choose from. Keeping in mind some of the most important review platforms, we are going to compare the services that each one offers, as well as their advantages and disadvantages. In addition, we are going to show several statistics about the use of these platforms during recent years. This work can help the conference organizers choose the most appropriate platform to manage their conference.**

Keywords- Conference review systems; Online conference platforms; Paper submission; Conferences comparative; Reviewers Assignment.

I.   INTRODUCTION

In the beginnings of conferences, when authors wanted to submit a paper to a conference, they had to send it by ordinary postal service or airmail services. After the review process, the paper and the reviewers' comments were returned to the author. Before the deadline, authors had to make the corrections to their papers and send them again to the conference manager. While the papers were traveling, the authors expected that papers and reviews were not lost during the shipment. This method was expensive and it consumed a lot of time. Furthermore, it was difficult to track lost or delayed papers [1].

When the use of computers was more common among the population and especially in universities and research centers, the sending of documents in paper decreased. Instead, the authors sent their work on magnetic supports as floppy disks [2]. The appearance of electronic mail (e-mail) and the extension of its use facilitated several aspects in the organization of conferences. This method improved the process of paper submissions and the revisions of papers. It also saved time and money. However, it was still laborious to organize and distribute the papers to the reviewers [1].

Finally, the development of online web-based systems has made even easier the organization of conferences. Authors and reviewers are now able to track their papers' progress anytime and anywhere, if they have Internet connection.

In addition, the conference Chair can efficiently manage a lot of papers and reviews, as well as respond to comments and complaints from the authors [1].

Since the apparition of web-based services, scientific communities have established several policies and mechanisms to implement electronic conference management. The main reason of these is to reduce the operational and communication costs without reducing the high quality of the revision process. It should also maintain the fairness in the evaluation process [3].

Nowadays, there exist a lot of web-based systems that are able to manage the submissions and other tasks related to the conferences organization. There are mainly two options. On one hand, it is possible to download different software to create our own management system.

On the other hand, web-based systems offer the possibility to order services for a conference. In some cases, these additional services (which can include different options) imply a higher price. In other cases, these services are free. Some features typically provided by these platforms are [4]:

- Submission of abstracts and papers by Authors.
- Submission of reviews by the Program Committee Members (PCM).
- Download of papers by Program Committee (PC).
- Handling of reviewers preferences and bidding.
- Web-based assignment of papers to PCMs for review.
- Review progress tracking.
- Web-based PC meeting.
- Notification of acceptance/rejection.
- Sending e-mails for notifications.

A Web-based solution acts as a communication channel between submitters and organizers/editors.

First of all, a user must register (create an account) in order to gain access to the system, which allows him/her to add/modify submissions and get feedback [2]. The registration process allows users to enter personal details and select his/her username and password. In many occasions additional information may be required [2].

In order to submit a paper to a conference, we should go to the platform that hosts the conference. On most platforms, it is mandatory to introduce the title, abstract, keywords and author names.

These keywords are used to facilitate the allocation of submissions to suitable reviewers. The user can submit an abstract and can check the submitted data, as well as observe

the status of his/her paper. If the abstract is accepted, the user will be able to upload the full text version for review [2]. In other cases, the full version of the paper is sent at the same time with the abstract.

After the submission deadline, the papers must be assigned to several reviewers. Hence, the PC Chair sends the submitted papers with review forms to individual reviewers. The review form consists of a set of questions to assess the quality of the paper that the reviewers must fill in and return it to the PC Chair. Each platform has a specific system to organize the distribution of papers between the reviewers. Each submission is typically evaluated by at least 2 or 3 reviewers.

Generally, the review process ends with the PC meeting where the papers are discussed on the basis of collected review forms, in order to decide their acceptance or rejection for presentation at the conference [4].

In this paper, we are going to compare some of the most important review platforms, which allow us to host our conferences. Finally we have compared the features of the 5 platforms that have organized more than 1000 conferences from their beginnings.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows. Section 2 shows works about some platforms for managing the conferences. Some researches about the improvements of these platforms are also included. Section 3 presents the platforms and review systems available in internet. We also show the number of conferences organized in their history. The evolution of some of these platforms is shown in Section 4. Section 5 presents a comparative study of the five platforms, which have hosted more than 1000 conferences. Section 6 shows our conclusions and future works.

II. RELATED WORKS

There are some works that present new platforms for conference managing and others, which analyze some statistical data about the use of these platforms. In this section we are going to see some of them.

According to the Association of Learned and Professional Society Publishers (ALPSP) [1] on web submission and review systems for journals, among the 442 respondents selected at random from the ISI Web of Knowledge database, we should highlight this:

- 81% of users prefer to use web submission and review systems
- 36% of users would think twice when choosing a journal without online submission for their work.

When the online submission systems were introduced, there was an increase of 25% in submission volumes and publishers reported a decrease of 30% in the administration time. For these reasons the online submission and review systems are playing a significant role in the conferences organization process.

B. Martens et al. [2] discuss the logistics of the submission and review process of conference entries by means of a "free", web-based application. They focus their explanations in the SOPS (SciX Open Publishing Services), a conference application that has been developed. The SOPS application provides functionalities to support the organization of a conference offering services for the registration of participants, submission and reviewing of abstracts, full-paper submission, reviewing and publishing.

M. Papagelis et al. [3] present an implemented system named Confious. It is a state-of-the-art management system that combines modern design based on a sophisticated algorithm that helps the program committee (PC) Chair perform some of the most difficult tasks in the conference organization. This system improves the efficient management and monitoring of the overall coordination process in conferences.

J. H. Johnson et al. [5] describe a web-based application system that can offer support for conference organizers. It was developed in 1997. WitanWeb offers interactions among program committee members, authors, and reviewers for the refereeing process of conferences. Authors also describe the evolution and changes that Witan Web can admit to adapt its function to several research fields.

As we have mentioned earlier, one of the problems in the organization of conferences is the distribution of submissions between reviewers. In this context, N. Di Mauro at al [4] describe the Global Review Assignment Processing Engine (GRAPE). This system allows the conference management and other tasks, such as automatic assignment of reviewers to papers submitted to a conference, additionally assessing the quality of the results of this activity in terms of profitability and efficiency. Their proposal was evaluated on real-world conference datasets obtaining good results when compared to the handmade ones.

S. Dumais et al. [6] present a new automated assignment method called "n of 2n" that achieves better performance than human experts. This method sends twice as many papers as they are actually asked to review, so they can choose which ones they want to review (the rest are assigned again). This method may also have some motivational advantage over traditional assignment methods where the reviewers have no choice. This method achieved improvement of 48% compared to the random assignment.

D. Yarowsky et al. [7] describe and evaluate a system for the automatic routing of submitted papers to reviewers and area committees. The main characteristic of this method is that the system does not need any human annotation from the reviewers or the program chair. The routing system is based on a profile of previous writings available on-line for the reviewer pool. Authors explore several variations of the core model, "which makes that system accuracy be close to the task of several human judges on the same task.

P. Rigaux [8] presents a simple method, which provides an approximate solution to the problem without requiring each user to rate each item. The method is based on an iterative process. The iterative process is performed by a collaborative filtering algorithm. The system allows users to rate a sample of the paper. Then the algorithm predicts the missing ratings as well as their level of confidence (which is initially 0). A new ballot improves the accuracy of predictions. The administrator of the system is responsible for stopping the iteration when a satisfactory level is reached.

The method presented by P. Rigaux can be used for the assignment of reviewers to papers.

As far as we know, there are no other works similar to ours, where the most important platforms for organizing conferences are analyzed and compared.

III. DESCRIPTION OF EACH PLATFORM

There are several platforms to host conferences. But people usually tend to use only some of them. In this section, we are going to explain the main aspects of each review system according to the information available on their websites. We have also provided a comparative in number of conferences hosted by each platform.

Easy Chair [9] is a free conference management system easy to use. It presents several features to make it suitable and flexible for various models of conferences. It has been designed to help program chairs to cope with the complexity of the reviewing process. The first version of Easy Chair was implemented in 2002. It was used by 12 conferences from 2002 to 2004. During 2005, 66 conferences used Easy Chair to host the conference. Since 2006, Easy chair has become number the one conference management system in terms of the number of conferences, users and submissions.

Microsoft's Conference Management Toolkit (CMT) [10] is a free conference management service sponsored by Microsoft Research. CMT is capable of handling the complex workflow of an academic conference. In last two years, CMT has been used for more than 700 conferences, workshops and various other events. Last year, CMT had been used for more than 400 conferences including several ACM and IEEE conferences.

EDAS [11] manages the paper submissions, review and registration process for conferences, workshops and journals. It is a hosted and supported service, i.e., no software is necessary. The support staff helps authors, reviewers and chairs without any problems. Users can interact with EDAS using standard web browsers. EDAS supports the full conference lifecycle. It includes submission and review processes, discussion and decision about papers, conference registration, copyright elaboration and travel grants. EDAS can offer support for Visa letters, CD-ROM, USB and IEEE Xplore proceedings and conference program brochure. In addition, this platform can host the conference web pages, with a configurable template and system menus. The host of a web site does not incur extra cost and the web pages are maintained indefinitely.

ConfTool [12] is a Web-based event management system developed to support the organization of academic conferences, workshops, congresses and seminars. It is available in several languages. ConfTool offers two versions of services, in function of the event features. On one hand, it has a standard version designed for smaller events with up to 150 participants. The service is an open/shared-source system, which can be acquired under different licenses. For organizing small non-commercial events, ConfTool offers a free license. On the other hand, it has a professional version more flexible than the previous one. It can be used for events with many participants, several contribution types and sub-events.

Open Conference Systems (OCS) [13] was created in 1998. OCS is a free Web publishing tool that allows organizers to create a complete Web presence for conferences. OCS allows to create a conference Web site and compose and send a call for papers. Through OCS platform, it is possible to electronically accept paper and abstract submissions where authors can edit their work. At the end of a conference, organizers can post conference proceedings and papers in a searchable format, and even if the organizer wants, it is possible to integrate a post-conference online discussion forum.

START V2 [14] is an integrated, user-friendly, web-based system for managing peer-reviewed conferences. This interface was designed to follow the typical flow of a conference's editorial process. START V2 can be used in two ways. On one hand, the organizer can download and install the system to run on his server. The other option is to have the server hosted at softconf.com. In both options the license includes the maintenance services, upgrades and installation help, for the duration of your conference process.

Conference Online-Management System (COMS) [15] is a web application for managing the registration, payment, paper submission and paper review. This system tries to accommodate the support to the conference features. The Conference Chair or administrator can perform changes in his COMS profile and see the effects of these changes in real-time. It is possible to achieve a simple user interface disabling some features for the users view.

Congrex [16] is an international management company that offers support and services for meetings, events, conferences, association management, travel and accommodation. Congrex, offers conference bid support, venue sourcing including a destination comparisons, conference logistics management, such as, registration services, program content management and financial management and budgeting, among others. This system can also be in charge of conference promotion and accommodation and conference housing bureau, etc.

CyberChair [17] fully supports all activities comprised in the review process. CyberChair was founded in 1997. According to some statistics, the use of this platform has decreased in the number of conference since 2005. The last conference was organized in 2011. This platform allows authors to send the abstract of their papers and the final version in the camera-ready, follow the status of his paper and the notifications of acceptance and rejection. In addition, the PC chair can control the reviewer assignment based on the reviewers' preferences and expertise and the review submission process, prepare the proceedings (according to the Springer-Verlag procedure) and the abstracts for the conference website and program booklet.

TrackChair [18] is a modern tool for peer review conferences. It has been developed by conference organizers. This platform divides the conference process in four stages: conference setup, paper submission, review assignment and tracking and accepting and rejecting papers. For managing our conference, we can use Firefox or Safari because both of these browsers are much faster than Internet Explorer, especially with large pages.

iChair [19] is another platform to control and manage the submission and review process in a conference. iChair was developed in the third quarter of 2005 by Thomas Baignères and Matthieu Finiasz. The developers tried to make this platform as easy to install as possible. This platform can be used on a Windows based server an in Linux box. It is based on a server software designed to help the program chair of a conference with all tasks involved in the conference organization. iChair can perform the tasks of submission collection, assignment of articles to reviewers, review collection, discussions, mailing to authors and reviewers, among others.

Academics [20] provides customized software solutions and services for academic professionals around the world. Because the conference management can be a complex chain of tasks involving communication, collaboration, job assignment, and decision making between CP chair, authors, reviewers, Academics can facilitate this process. It offers several web-based systems for conferences. Some of them are paper submission and review system, conference management system, and event registration and payment system. Depending on the conference features, these services can be customized without charging over the original price.

Confious [3] is a state-of-the-art management system that combines modern design based on a sophisticated algorithm that helps the program committee (PC) Chair perform some of the most difficult tasks in the conference organization. Confious system is provided as a web service. This means that there is no need for separate installations for each conference served. Confious can support multiple conferences in parallel, transparent between each other. This system improves the efficient management and monitoring of the overall coordination process in conferences.

From the available data on their conference web sites, we have extracted the number of conference that each platform has hosted. Table 1 shows the number of conferences organized by each system until now.

According to these values, we can see that the most important web-based system is EasyChair. It has become very popular between the research communities in last years. EasyChair has hosted more than 21.000 conferences.

Other platforms like EDAS, ConfTool, Open Conference system and START V2 are also very important. All of them have organized more than 1000 conferences.

We can group together the platforms that have organized between 100 (or nearly) and 1000 conferences. This group includes CMT, COMS, Congrex, CyberChair or TrackChair.

Finally there exist some web-based systems where the number of conference is fewer than 50 (or nearly), like Confius, Academics, iChair and SIGCHI. All of them (except the last one) are apparently out of use from conference since 2009 or 2011. SIGCHI has conferences to organize during 2013 and 2014.

IV.   EVOLUTION OF CONFERENCES

The platforms evolution we have presented, in terms of the number of conferences organized, can vary greatly depending on the year. The data that each system provides can be very limited. In this section, we are going to show values of conferences organized considering their relevance. We have tried to show their evolution in different years.

Fig. 1 shows the number of conference in percentage for the 13 platforms that we have cited.

We can see that Easy Chair is the most used system for organizing conferences, even more that the sum of all others. EDAS, OCS, START V2 and ConfTool are also widely used. They have percentages from 10% to 5%. CTM, CyberChair and COMS have percentages from 5% to 1%. The rest of these platforms are less important.

It is possible to perform an interesting analysis by comparing the data of number of conference per year. Unfortunately, all sites do not provide this kind of information. For this reason, in Fig. 2 we have only shown the evolution of sites that offer information per years until 2012. We have grouped in an only group the review platforms with lowest percentages (CONFIUS, Academics and iChair). Because the number of conferences to 2013 can change, we have processed this data separately.

As Fig. 2 shows, START V2 began its trajectory as a conference organizer in 2002. The first years it registered a great increase in number of conferences having its maximum register in 2008 (233 Organized Conferences). In recent years, the number of conferences organized has decreased up to 200 conferences per year.

TABLE I.   RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EACH REVIEW PLATFORM AND THE NUMBER OF ORGANIZED CONFERENCES.

Review Platforms and their Conferences			
Name	*Conferences*	*Name*	*Conferences*
EASYCHAIR	21.448	COMS	323
EDAS	2.655	CONGREX	123
OCS	1.900	TrackChair	97
START V2	1.778	iChair	51
ConfTool	1.652	Academics	21
CMT	700	CONFIOUS	17
CyberChair	480		
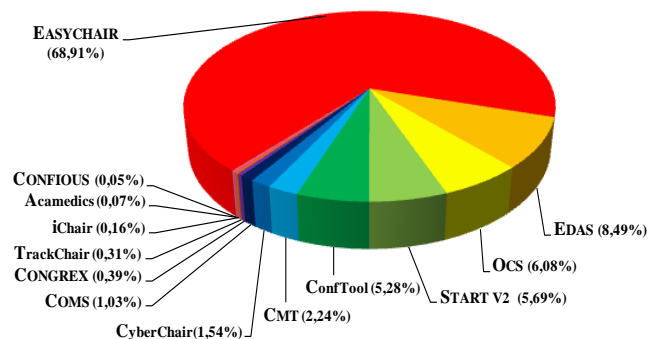
Figure 1.   Conferences organiced by each system

Figure 2. Evolution of number of conferences per site
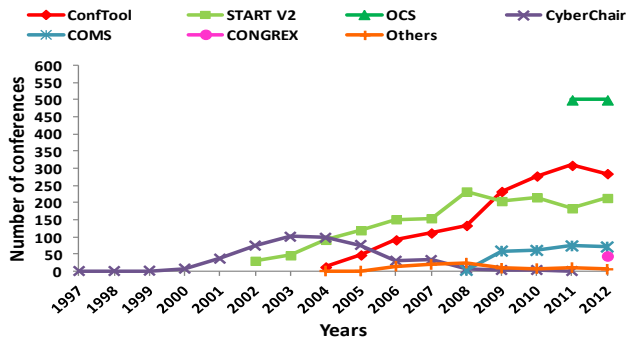

Figure 3. Number of conferences per dite in 2008.

Figure 4. Number of conferences per site in 2013.

This value remains constant until 2012. START V2 has (at the moment) 129 conferences for this year.

Although ConfTool started to work 2 years latter (in 2004), this platform, has registered a higher increase than START V2. Its maximum values have reached in 2011 with 309 organized conferences. Since then, ConfTool has had 285 conferences in 2012 and at the moment it is organizing 141 conferences for 2013.

CyberChair was founded in 1997. CyberChair had an increase of use in the following years to its creation. But it evolution has not been so high than others like ConfTool and START V2. CyberChair presents its highest values in 2003 with 101 organized conferences. These values remained stable until 2004. The number of conferences started to decrease since 2011 when CyberChair organized its last conference. In last years of CyberChair (2009), COMS appeared. COMS has organized around 60 conference per year until 2012.

In 2012, CONGREX started to organize conferences. As we can see in the first years the platforms, they experiment an increase in the number of organized conferences. Assuming that this site is still in the first period and that it has already some conferences to organize in 2014, 2015 and even 2016, it is possible that the use of this platform will increase in the next years.

Fig. 3 shows the number of conferences organized by some of these systems during 2008.

In 2008, the number of conferences of ConfTool and START V2 are very different. Both represent more than 90% of the total of conferences organized. iChair, CyberChair and CONFIUS have little representation in the organization of conferences. Its very important to obtain recent data to analyse the actual importance of each platform, because the changes can be high .In 2008, CONGREX had not been created.

Fig. 4 shows the number of conferences that are being organized by the some of these systems in 2013.

From 2008, we can see that these percentages have changed. According to the available data, EDAS will be the most relevant web-based service in 2013. Regarding to information of Fig. 2, ConfTool and START V2 have similar behaviour.

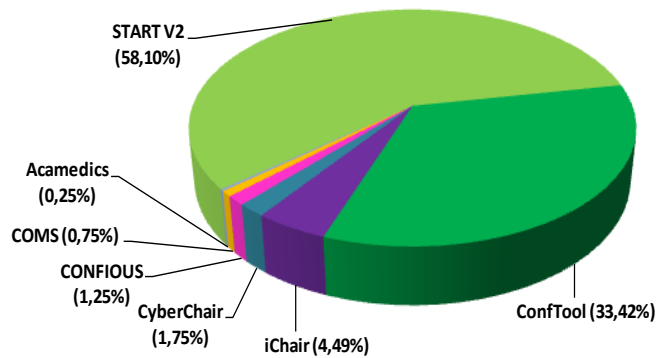In 2013, this behavior still exists and both of them have percentages near 20%.
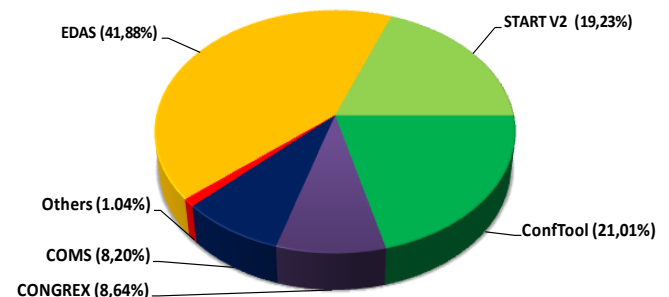
ConfTool has more conferences (12 more than the number of conferences in 2008). COMS has almost half the percentage that START V2 has.

The total number of conference included in the information available is 401 conferences in 2008 and 671 conferences in 2013.

V. COMPARATIVE STUDY

In this section, we are going to compare the five most important platforms, in terms of the number of conferences organized from their beginnings. Table 2 shows the platforms features of systems with more than 1000 organized conferences.

As we can see, all of 5 platforms have similar characteristics. EDAS allows authors to have access to submit works in any conference that EDAS are organizing. The other platforms do not offer this feature. EasyChair, ConfTool and OCS have a demo version that allows organizers to see a preview of the product that they are going to purchase. All of them are relatively easy to use and are very flexible (all of them have am available user guide, except EasyChiar). That means that organizers can customize their final product. In exception of EasyChair and EDAS, the rest of platforms have a friendly point of view to the authors. OCS, START V2 and ConfTool can be used in other languages than English. Only ConfTool permits to select the option to manual selection to send each submitted paper to each reviewer, the other makes it automatically. ConfTool and Start V2 show past conferences and allow searching conferences per year, but neither allows searching conferences per topics or countries.

TABLE II.   PLATFORM FEATURES.

Review Platforms Features					
Name	*Easychair*	*ConfTool*	*EDAS*	*Open Conference Systems*	*START V2.*
Total number of conferences	21448	1652	2655	1900	1778
Add technical/ committee members	✓	✓	✓	✓	n/a
Automatic preparation of conference proceedings	✓	✓	✓	✓	n/a
Automatic reminders	✓	✓	✓	✓	n/a
Blind review	✓	✓	✓	n/a	n/a
Can't submit form the main webpage, must to go to a congress page	✓	✓	No	✓	✓
Conference summary	✓	✓	✓	✓	n/a
Demo version	No	✓	No	✓	No
Easy to use	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Flexible	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Free	Not all	For small conferences	No	✓	✓
Friendly	No	✓	No	✓	✓
Guide step by steps	n/a	✓	✓	✓	✓
Mail to groups	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Multilanguage	No	✓	No	✓	✓
Needs instalation	No	✓	No	✓	Yes/No
Price list	No	No	✓	No	No
Random/ manual reviewer paper assignment	Authomatic	Both	Authomatic	Authomatic	Authomatic
Serch conferencer per countries	No	No	No	No	No
Serch conferencer per topics	No	No	No	No	No
Serch conferencer per years	No	✓	No	No	✓
Shows past conferences	No	✓	No	No	✓
Single track/ multitrack	Both	Both	Both	Both	Both
Supott copyright submission	✓	n/a	✓	✓	n/a
Suport Journals	n/a	No	✓	✓	No
Suport Reviewers discussion	✓	✓	✓	✓	n/a
Suport Visa Request	✓	n/a	✓	n/a	n/a
Templates for mailing	✓	✓	✓	✓	n/a
Well designed	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

n/a: Information not available.

All of them permit to select a multitrack or single track. Finally, except START V2, all of them can support reviewer discussion.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

When we want to organize a conference, it is very important to consider the use of a platform to submit and review articles. After all the information recopiled, we can see that there are several systems and platforms for organizing conferences, some of them free. Nowadays, the most important one is EasyChair, which are partly free. Almost all systems show similar behaviour. In their first years since their creation, they start to experiment an increase in the number of organized conferences. Some of them get maximums some years later and after that, the number of conferences remains stable for years. Others, after reaching the maximum value, start to decrease in number of organized conferences. That can be caused by the development of new systems with more options. The new options usually present lower price and in many occasions offer easier systems to submit or review papers than the existent options. So the popularity of existent systems that actually are now the most popular can increase or decrease according to the competitiveness against new systems.

Finally, if we want to choose a platform to host or manage our conference, we should keep in mind several features even the price of the service. For example, OCS and START V2 are completely free while EasyChair and ConfTool are partially free and EDAS is not free.

We think that this work can be used by organizers as a guide to choose the most convenient platform for his conference, according to their characteristics, such as number of expected attendees, number of tracks of conference, etc.

Now, we are analyzing the main destinations to locate a conference in function of several factors, such as climate and the use of new technologies of countries, among others. Moreover, we will study if regular virtual learning platforms [21] could be used for this purpose.

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