

TEACHER'S PRESENCE AND IMMEDIACY IN E-LEARNING CLASSES

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Abstract: *The final output from e-learning classes is relatively lower than in face-to-face learning. Only highly motivated and well oriented e-learners are successful ones. The instructor's role in this case is obvious, mainly with the features of its personal presence. Based on the author's own experience and literature review, this paper discusses the teacher's presence and immediacy as activities aiming to avoid the risks of learner's disorientation and demotivation.*

Key words: *e-learning, teacher's presence, teaching immediacy, students' motivation*

Introduction

Education, like almost all social spheres, is changed drastically by the Internet. Distance and e-learning nowadays are synonymous, absorbing and modifying practically the whole didactic experience. Involving the achievements of the cognitive psychology, many educational technologies are implemented in the e-learning practice in order to assure a flexible and adaptable learning process and, at last, sound and persistent knowledge. Meanwhile, a whole new generation is submerged in a flood of information via Internet and other digital media. Many authors call them "digital natives", emphasizing their early addiction and special attitude to Internet services. Digital natives are the real population that undergoes the modern education and their habits to gain information and to build knowledge cannot be neglected. As a result universities have to meet the expectations of this new generation.

At New Bulgarian University both the full-time and distance forms of education are enhanced by e-learning. Though e-learning has been mainly related to distance education it is also transforming face-to-face teaching. The Moodle NBU platform provides access to e-learning content for each course and supports active communications among instructors and students in both forms of study. The shift from traditional classroom to virtual platform may represent a real challenge for instructors and learners. The increased use of various devices permits high connectivity among the learners. The lack of proper communications [1] with the course instructor leads to disorientation of students and indifference to the overall learning process. It is up to the teacher to give the students a perception of community.

The role of interactivity in establishing the instructor's presence and live engagement in the course activities is vital to the effectiveness of e-learning. Teacher's visibility and immediacy brings sense of reality and seriousness and at the same time proves their personal identity. Teacher's presence is defined as "the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educational worthwhile learning outcomes" [2]. It is marked by the instructor's role in e-learning class environments. Teaching immediacy concerns instructor's availability as perceived by the learners [3].

The goal of this study is to investigate the influence of instructor's presence and immediacy over students' performance in e-learning classes. The analysis is based on our experience in delivering courses via different kinds of virtual learning environments (VLE) both for distance and regular courses. We also carried out an extensive review of literature. It seems that comparison of traditional face-to-face learning with the online approach leads to identification of strategies how to engage and motivate today's trainees in both educational and professional settings. This conforms to the lasting trend towards blended education. We also discuss the diversities in digital learners' motivation referring the instructor's personal involvement.

Instructor's Presence

The relation between teacher's presence and students' perception of the material is examined in literature [4, 5]. In non-supported by a VLE face-to-face classes teachers interact with students in a straightforward manner receiving verbal and non-verbal signs as it concerns their involvement in the learning process. Instructors are able to take advantage of their physical presence.

Teacher's visibility in online classes is to be interpreted in a different way. Verbal communication with instructors is missing in online classes. The instructor must actively be present throughout the course in order to ensure proper feedback. Moreover online students expect an immediate feedback on any issue of interest. Otherwise they complain and feel isolated or insecure and participate less in the course. Every student has to feel that the tutor is always present and monitors his/her individual efforts. The physical remoteness of online classes makes interaction with the instructor very important as it concerns students' satisfaction. However reading and replying text one-to-one is much more labor intensive than the oral exchanges in a face-to-face class. Most students email their teachers many times and the instructors often have to respond one question several times. Usually students do not respect the overall charge of the instructors.

Another problem might be in the absence of positive emotions. In normal class environment, the overall appearance (non-verbal communication) might help teachers to transfer knowledge to students. Consider, for example, the importance of charisma – the charm. Therefore, teachers are not only expected to convey

information, but also to excite positive emotions about the learning. Such kind of synergy, usual for successful teachers, is nowadays plausible in e-learning due to the network technologies. Neat encouragement to the learner can be peered in various ways, e.g. using properly composed postings.

A three-part model of teaching presence is proposed in [2]. Its main components are: instructional design, facilitating discourse, and direct instruction. Instructional design deals with course organization. Facilitating discourse focuses on the identification of areas of agreement or disagreement, seeking to reach consensus and understanding, encouraging and reinforcing students' contributions, setting the climate for learning, and prompting discussion. Direct instruction centers on the presentation of content and questions, summarizing discussion, confirming understanding, and responding to technical questions.

Following this model before the start of every e-learning course we carefully plan and prepare the content of each learning unit, set the curriculum, establish time parameters for students' activities, and determine the netiquette rules. Students are informed that their course work is submitted to a check for plagiarism. In order to facilitate a productive discourse we use the possibilities of the applied VLE e.g. forums, chats, e-mails etc. to draw the participants in various discussions and to reinforce students' contributions. We try to stimulate learners' engagement in the overall process. Direct instruction deals with the presentation of the content, the proper formulation of discussion questions and the answer to different kind of learners' questions. We think that ongoing interactions of teachers represent the key to their visibility in e-learning classes.

Instructor's Immediacy

Immediacy is defined by psychological availability. Instructor's immediacy refers to the behavior that takes the teachers and trainees closer together in terms of perceived distance. Non-verbal immediacy includes behavior such as smiling, gesturing, eye contact and relaxed body language. Verbal immediacy refers to calling the students by name, using humor and encouraging students' input and discussion [6]. Verbal immediacy appears to be more relevant for e-learning classes as the instructor is not physically apparent. Students lack non-verbal communications with their instructors and they need a frequent support to be involved in the different activities. To establish verbally immediate behavior we carefully design our course content and pay attention on the written interactions with students. Politeness, accessibility and visual cues e.g. instructors' video lessons, animations, cartoons, funny images, etc. are also used to attract trainees' attention. We initiate discussions, ask questions and give different kinds of assignments.

Teacher's immediacy relates strongly to students' motivation, learning, and perception of the learning process [3]. Usually, students are more attracted to instructors who show immediacy traits. We use the electronic communication tools

of the applied VLE to reduce the psychological and physical distance and to increase the level of interaction among learners and instructors. In this way we try to achieve social interaction similar to that in face-to-face classrooms.

Learners' habits and the role of instructors

A positive feature of digital natives [7] is their high adaptability without any prior preparation in an unknown environment. Access to web resources and computer games form habits and develop intuition to recognize the interface through experimentation. This approach to acquire knowledge somewhat neutralizes the school routine utilization of ready formatted knowledge. Nowadays learners approach pragmatically the course material and acquire selectively the content they estimate as useful. No considerations about curricula integrity are taken into account. There is a universal principle - efforts saving - that is widely applied by nowadays learners with sad consequences to the overall educational process. When students are not very motivated some changes occur in their behavior. One of these changes refers to delay of the memorization. Despite the announced educational goals students accept the learning unit, but they expect to acquire general knowledge on a given topic. Next change relates to the attempt to get a notion of the subject, by connecting separate facts understood by analogy. This can represent a serious obstacle for further deepening in details and acquiring the knowledge as previewed in the curriculum. Often students try to do their own compendium of the theme, thus reducing memorization and avoiding other learning activities associated with higher cognitive levels.

The above discussed peculiarities of the students' behavior express a spontaneous strategy for information handling. These peculiarities have to be considered, not just interpreted during the planning of learning activities. Not accidentally modern concepts of cognitive levels include meta- knowledge [8] and the development of cognitive skills.

So, instructor's presence and immediacy affect not only students' motivation and performance in e-learning classes, but also their awareness of the overall educational goals and strategies.

New technologies permit considerable educational communication with the students. Interaction in e-learning classes is immanent and it is up to the instructor to stimulate discussions thus establishing presence and immediacy. The active teacher's participation and engagement in the course activities motivates students' learning. To stimulate participation we apply some practices:

- the syllabus presents the rules of participation in discussions;
- any discussion lasts for a week;
- ask learners to use the provided learning content;
- ask learners to comment on other postings.

Communications with students, e.g. directing class discussions, positive and constructive timely feedbacks, emotional responses, etc. increase students' motivation and contributes to effective learning.

Conclusion

In this paper we explore the role of instructor's presence and immediacy in e-learning classes. Ongoing interactions that occur within the course are central to the students' motivation and engagement in the learning process. The active involvement of teachers in course activities benefits students' effective learning and cognition.

Quantitative and qualitative studies have to be performed so as to verify our statements. In order to enhance understanding of pedagogical processes in e-learning classes we intend to develop a proper questionnaire and to carry out a survey research to measure teacher's presence and immediacy.

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ПРИСЪСТВИЕ И РЕАКЦИЯ НА ПРЕПОДАВАТЕЛЯ В ЕЛЕКТРОННОТО ОБУЧЕНИЕ

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Резюме: Крайните резултатите от електронното обучение са относително по-слаби от тези на присъственото обучение. При електронното обучение успешни са

само високо мотивираните и добре ориентирани обучаеми. Ролята на преподавателя в този случай е очевидна, основно посредством възможностите за лично общуване. Въз основа на личен опит и преглед на литературата, в този доклад авторите дискутират присъствието и реакцията на преподавателя като въздействия с цел избягване на рисковете от дезориентиране и демотивиране на обучаемите.