

## E-LEARNING ONLINE AND THE ROLE OF SOCIAL COMMUNICATION

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### ABSTRACT

The topic of learning is one of the key factors leading to a competitive advantage in the contemporary globalized practice. The paper focuses on the issue of learning supported by ICT with a focus on innovative online teaching practices. Attention is mainly paid to the roles of social communication and social interaction in the process. The importance of the social interaction and communication is demonstrated by e-learning courses experience. A comparison of two different types of online courses based on blended learning, virtual teamwork and lecturing and its implications are presented there.

**Key Words:** Communication, interaction, virtual teamwork, blended learning, lecturing.

### INTRODUCTION

#### Contemporary changes in the process of learning

The conception of learning has undergone a number of significant changes lately. There is a shift from teaching i.e. the traditional way of teaching when the teacher is providing knowledge or as Barr and Tagg say *“from the old paradigm a college is an institution that exists to provide instruction”* to learning which means active participation in gaining and sharing of knowledge among the participants of the educational process i.e. active spreading of knowledge, accumulation and sharing of data, the ability to properly evaluate and use the gained data or as Barr and Tagg shortly say *“to the new paradigm a college is an institution that exists to produce learning”* (Barr, Tagg, 1996).

Learning is seen more and more as an active individual process, where learners construct their own knowledge base. Learning is also increasingly seen as a process based on sharing and participation with different partners in a community, and is being viewed as a holistic constructing process which is interconnected with learners' social and cultural premises. Learning increases and teachers start to be more and more coordinators, mediators or tutors in this process.

A practical example of how these findings can be utilized is to be found for example in Senge's conception of a learning organization where people continually improve their abilities to reach the demanded goals. People in such an organization are permanently learning how to coexist and learn with others, they are slowly uncovering ways they can create and change reality. According to Senge this type of organization is based on the principle of the impossibility not to learn. (Senge, 1990)

**The concept of knowledge** has also changed from one of static transmitted contents, to knowledge that is ever renewable and often construed jointly with other learners. Knowledge creation is socially shared, and emerges from participation in socio-cultural activities

Learning can then be seen as a permanent test of experience and its transformation into data acceptable to the whole company and relevant to reaching the set goals. (Senge, 1990) According to Senge one of the most important prerequisites of this process of learning is systemic thinking.

While knowledge continues to be available in educational institutions such as schools and universities, it is increasingly located in workplaces as well as in everyday life, accessible through various media- and technology-based environments. Open access to knowledge creates new requirements for learners

Collective team learning is another very important component of this conception of learning. Collective team learning is based on effective cooperation of all team members. If this requirement is to be met the team-members have to be “tuned” the same way and the team has to become an efficiently working organism i.e. a system and not a group of individuals with different visions and often also completely different interests. (Senge, 1990).

Learning environments and learning are mostly **cooperative, collaborative, and supportive**. The goal is **not to transfer knowledge but to create environments and experiences** that help students to discover and construct knowledge for them, to make students members of learner communities that make discoveries and solve problems, and recognizing that the chief agent in the process is the learner.

### E-learning

The ongoing and increasing tendency to optimize the use of ICT is one of the very important aspects of the European strategy for creating a strong knowledge economy which would secure economic growth and job opportunities. E-learning seems to be a great tool of increasing the efficiency of “learning”. E-learning allows for a better connection between today's need of information and providing the chance to learn. E-learning also provides interactive multimedia able to catch and keep students' attention (Davenport, 2001).

That is why one of the main goals of today's e-learning activities should primarily be supporting new forms of work mainly in the area of self-studying and of what we call learning which means concentration on the development of learning in opposition to traditional teaching. There should of course be some degree of professional supervision by tutors. One of the key requirements of today's educational process is the development and the support of new methods of learning i.e. individual work with accessible data, the ability to search for relevant data, acquire information and work with it, exchange knowledge, share data, and accumulate findings.

Davenport's comparison of the amount of study material provides us with a very vivid example. In 1472 the biggest university library situated in Queen College, Cambridge contained 199 books. Today 300 000 new books are produced every year and there are more than two billion web pages on the internet (Davenport, 2001,:1).

The amount of data provided for us by modern technology is not the only aspect of the relationship between learning and attention that Davenport points out. He describes the time of traditional teaching as follows: during the time of the actual school education many of us directed their attention towards anything else but the education. Of course we can read, write, think and also research a little but we forgot a lot of things we thought we would keep. It did not help that we were formally educated from childhood till adulthood for our attention was directed towards fun with classmates, our changing bodies, the opposite sex, etc... It also did not help that teachers were trying to train us in keeping our attention, although experience tells us that even the teachers themselves were often not able to do that (Davenport, 2001: 2).

Davenport's thoughts tell us two things. 1. The number of hours and years spent at school does not mean concentrated attention and therefore gaining and keeping the required amount of knowledge. 2. Informal communication and social interaction are very important aspects of the process of education.

Of course e-learning is not some almighty tool of today's education but if it is understood correctly and therefore also used correctly it can help us to achieve the desired transformation of the educational system or in other words to change the paradigm in accordance with the changes of social reality in all aspects of human social existence.

The most progressive contemporary form of e-learning appears to be online teaching.

If multilateral social communication and social interaction are the key requirements of achieving success in the process of learning it is necessary to think about **which way of social interaction in the virtual environment i.e. the cyberspace we should support** and what forms of social communication we should use.

## METHOD

### Long-term analysis of feedback

Students of the Faculty of Business Administration at the University of Economics in Prague can choose from two courses provided by the Department of Managerial Psychology and Sociology one of which is an e-learning course online fully realized by means of the internet, while the other one is a course based on the principle of blended learning which is a combination of actual lectures and online teaching.

Both these courses are based on virtual teamwork. Students of the combined variant meet face to face during lectures while seminars are based on virtual teamwork. The long-term analysis of feedback offers a very interesting comparison of remarks made by students of the two courses. The comparative analysis concentrates on the sample of 120 students from each course in the years 2008/2009 and 2009/2010.

The students of the two courses answer given questions about the quality of communication in the two courses, about possibilities and character of social interaction, and other characteristics of the two courses. All comments and remarks are then analyzed as a part of a long-term qualitative research which serves mainly as a source of innovations for the courses. The following comparative analysis helps to discover and identify differences between the two types of courses.

## FINDINGS

### Evaluation of communication and social interaction in the courses

The outcomes of the comparative analysis clearly show that the students of the course realized fully by means of the internet are more aware of the significance and the need of mutual communication and social interaction in the process of learning. The comments made by these students show that at the beginning of the course there are often worries about how to start, realize and organize cooperation with others. These worries are caused by the fact that the students cannot meet physically with their colleagues, but have to cooperate with them and create a cooperative product.

very student of the course is aware of the fact that it is necessary to start communicating with others...*When I entered the web page of the course I found out that I would have to somehow start cooperating with the others . . . When entering the course for the first time I wanted to scream, hallo . . . people . . . here I am . . . where are you? "*

On the other hand they are able to start active work and after making the initial contact with others they start using all the accessible tools of communication.

**The students also very much appreciate the chance to acquire some experience with virtual communication.**

*"I think that this course was a great chance to try cooperation based solely on virtual communication. This course is great experience of communication, which depends only on virtual devices. The great advantage is the ability to work and communicate at any time. It is really very flexible to be able to work anywhere you are.*

**The students of the course based on the principle of blended learning see e-communication used in seminars as a not very important addition to their face-to-face meetings.** They use their momentary face-to-face contact after the lectures to deal with necessary organizational issues and teamwork is then often replaced by more or less individual work on isolated parts of the assigned task. The frequency of both the communication on the chat and of the use of other electronic tools of communication is much lower than in the fully online course.

It is clear that although there is a number of tools of electronic communication to choose from the students of the blended learning course prefer face-to-face communication ... *we agreed on the individual tasks during the lectures and then I worked on my assignment by myself at home ... During the lectures we exchanged materials, agreed on what would each of us work on and how the work should proceed and then we used the seminars to finish the final product before submitting it.*

*I concentrated more on the lectures ... we divided the seminar work ... each of us did his part of the work and the leader of the team then put all the parts together.*

The students of the online course are more aware of all the possibilities offered by cooperating via the internet. Both the possibility of "borderless" cooperation and the possible uses of network cooperation in actual economic activity are appreciated much more by the students of the online course.

One of the requirements of the course is also communication among the teams which is supposed to ensure appropriate interconnection of the work in the course, sharing of experience and findings, and also informal exchange of opinions, remarks, ideas, etc... The frequency of communication among the teams has been very low in both courses so far. Remarks to other teams' works often connected with question about unclear points are the most common.

*...In my opinion communication with the other teams was rather limited. We read their work and ideas and we even made some comments on those. They (and of course we as well) answered some questions from the other teams. But I find this communication rather shallow.*

Nevertheless, the feedback analysis shows that the students appreciate the importance of communication among the teams and that they are interested in sharing the findings and broadening their knowledge. Various remarks suggest that the students are aware of the fact that communication among the teams is not sufficient and they are trying to propose measures which would improve this situation.

The students of the online course are much more active in this regard.

The findings of the analysis show that there is still much to make up for in both groups. The frequency of communication, as well as the content of messages and the flexibility of reactions on remarks is evaluated quite negatively by both groups.

On the other hand it is necessary to add that such a system of work has not yet built a tradition among the students. It can be said that the students are still getting used to this kind of cooperation and the ability of effective communication among the teams is still developing at the moment.

The students of the online course concentrate more on the communication inside the actual teams and their remarks and comments show that communication among the teams is often given only peripheral attention.

From the blended learning course students' remarks it is quite clear that since the students meet physically during the lectures they do not have any strong incentives to start any kind of team cooperation

*There was not much communication among the teams. I read the drafts of the other teams' works but sometimes I didn't know what I should remark...*

*It took me some time to notice that one of the teams had commented on our project. Since nobody from our team replied to the comment, I decided to reply myself but I did it quite late and I did not have time to discuss my reply with the rest of the members of our team.*

The fact that the course combines online learning with traditional lectures in a lecture room is probably causing that the students tend to view communication from the point of view of traditional teaching and they limit the time spent in the CMS environment to minimum.

The appreciation of the importance of mutual communication and of the development of the ability of social interaction is much higher in the fully online course. The students of this course appreciate much more their active role in the process of acquiring knowledge, developing skills in using ICT to work and they are also aware of the responsibility for the creation of a cooperative project.

The connection of the students of the blended learning course with the traditional form of studying appears to be quite strong, they prefer meeting face to face and they often overlook the possibilities of active work in the CMS and also of work by means of the internet.

Regarding the offer of tools of electronic communication it is possible to say that the students of the fully online course tend to use these tools much more often than the other group. Although there is a possibility of a face to face meeting if the students of the online course agree on such a meeting, it is hardly ever used.

On the other hand the blended learning course students use this possibility much more often. They meet informally on the school premises as well as other places more often than the other group. Although there is a place where they can meet flexibly regardless of time and space they prefer meeting in person to meeting online.

The findings of the analysis further show that there are some differences in the ability to agree on how to organize the teamwork. The biggest difficulties are with dividing the work in the team and with assigning individual tasks. The students of the blended learning course tend to rely more on the teacher who according to their comments can help them or give them some advice.

## CONCLUSION

### Perspectives

It is possible to claim that ICT have become an indispensable part of the process of learning. On the other hand it is quite clear that it is still necessary to improve and strengthen the abilities to work by means of ICT. Together with improving the concept of e-learning it is also necessary to improve the abilities to share findings, exchange experience and also the ability to adopt new ways of actively teaching each other. The transformation of traditional teaching into desired learning is not without obstacles and it requires a complex view of the possibilities and opportunities to strengthen the autonomy, activity, and also the responsibility for

learning itself. Social communication and interaction can help this process a lot even though they are realized by means of technology.

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