

SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE NEW PARADIGM WHEN USING WEB-BASED LEARNING

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Introduction

What happens when teachers and students never meet face-to-face but are in touch via computer? What changes can this new knowledge transmission add to the learning process and interpersonal relationships?

Learning is never passive. Neither it can be in an ODL (Open Distance Learning) environment. Learning is an active process where both teachers and students have to participate actively in order to be well succeeded. In terms of Web-Based Learning as to be implemented network of interactions in order to promote knowledge collaboratively. In this way the outcome must not be evaluated in terms of memorisation but by the depth of the conversation exchanges. Because people can not see each other and facial expressions, gestures and body language can not be part of the communication process written communication must be accurate and meaningful. Introvert students may have more success in this new learning environments due to the non-existence of social pressures. On the other hand extroverts students may not concentrate and interact effectively in the virtual environments. It is easier for a introvert person to reflect before answering a question. The other way round happens with extrovert people that talk without thinking just because they need to establish a social contact. Sproull and Kiesler (1991, p. 42) state: 'When people perceive communication to be ephemeral, the stakes

of communication seem smaller. People feel less committed to what they say, less concerned about it, and less worried about the social reception they will get... By removing reminders of a possibly critical audience, electronic mail induces people to be more open. New approaches and new skills of the learning process with shared empowerment of teachers and students are the great challenge of ODL.

Virtual communities

All the people involved in an ODL environment besides access to technology must feel at ease with it. Whole the guidelines must be free-flowing and must come out from the community. The key is the creation of a successful virtual learning community are honesty, responsiveness, respect, openness and empowerment. That is why a first face-to-face session (presential) is important to make the participants feel as a group.

In order to establish an effective learning community some principles must be taken into account:

- Active interaction involving both course content and personal communication.
- Collaborative learning evidenced by comments directed primarily student to student rather than student to instructor.
- Socially constructed meaning evidenced by agreement or questioning, with the intent to achieve agreement on issues of meaning.
- Sharing of resources among students.
- Expressions of support and encouragement exchanged between students, as well as willingness to critically evaluate the work of others.

Roles must be clear and few. Discussions must be open and participants must be involved actively in the matters.

It is common sense that asynchronous communications are preferred because this type of communication allows students to intervene whenever they feel like, after reflection. The challenge when co-ordination a synchronous sessions is related with time

management. Everyone must be good at timing to go along with the pace of the discussion. Another problem is related with the queue of the answers given because some of the answers may be not important when they arrive at the chat.

International groups may be considered a problem too, because of cultural differences that are more difficult to overcome in on-line sessions. In synchronous sessions brainstorming methodologies are very important because everyone may intervene. Conrad and Crowell (1997) suggest that:

- Set a specific time each day to read and respond to messages rather than doing it throughout the day.
- Wait to respond a message that upsets you and be careful of what you say and how you say it.
- Never say anything that you could not tolerate seeing in print on the front page of your local newspaper.
- Establish clear priorities for dealing with messages and categorise messages by importance and need to respond.

Participants in on-line sessions must know how to manage time in order to prevent difficulties and problems. Pallof & Pratt (1999) also suggest:

- Log on to the course site with the intention of downloading and reading only.
- Print new messages, if possible, to allow time to review them in a more leisurely fashion.
- Once messages have been read and reviewed, formulate a response to be posted. Do not feel as if an immediate response is necessary in an asynchronously environment.
- In order to be more thoughtful about responses, prepare them on a word processor and then copy and paste them to the course site. If hard disk space is at a premium or if a lab computer is being used, copy your responses to a floppy disk.

Teachers, when assuring on-line sessions must be always available in order to make students feel at easy, whenever they want.

Costs are also a problem. In spite of not spending much money on to face-to-face sessions, technology must be reliable and transmission costs may be problematic.

The capacity and/or the ability to provide feedback with critical quality that can help the rest of the community to reflect on the work done. This capacity has to be taught, modelled and encouraged by the teacher because in the majority of the cases students' feedback is light. This situation must be included in the guidelines discussed by all. As a novelty, it is by itself conflict. That is why Covey (1989, p. 76) says 'seek first to understand, then be understood, as a means by which to promote interdependence. Without interdependence, there can be no collaboration, and ultimately no community.'

Among learning community the teacher must establish independence. Otherwise the communication may be poor and not transformative. Mezirow (1991) says that transformative learning is based in reflection and interpretation of experiences, ideas and assumptions gotten from previous knowledge. Transformative learning is complex and multidimensional. Hargrove (1998, p. 62) calls it '*triple loop learning*', describing it as "learning that involves altering the particular perspective, underlying beliefs, and assumptions (or old rules) that shape who we are as a human being – what we identify with." This means that student does not finish a stage and begins the next one. Student visits the next stage returning to the previous and begins the next one in order to understanding the new one. Transformative learning will transform the learner in a reflexive practionist. At first knowledge is acquired. Then in the virtual community relationships will be established. The exchange of ideas will promote the debate and the process will develop and deepen. Transformative learning is based on reflection and interpretation of experiences. Debate is crucial. Transformative learning is a net of multidimensional interactions. A transformative learning is a process that transforms a student in a reflexive practionist. The process begins with knowledge acquisition and students get involved actively in this process in an online environment. When you consider a student an expert his/her self esteem grows and his/her confidence leads to new skills and new knowledge. Within this scenario the teacher role as an instructor can vanish because the student paces the rhythm and a student that is not active becomes a leader in a virtual environment presenting ideas and materials to be discussed by the group, as Pallof and Pratt (1999, p. 142) state: 'Rather than a process to be feared, the transformative learning process is one of the most exciting aspects of online learning.' Shared knowledge, critical discussion are decisive factors so that students can feel part

of the group. Their initial ideas become ideas of the group, that can expand into new ideas and therefore new learning.

Evaluation/assessment

When we speak about evaluation several ways must be considered as Pallof and Pratt (1999, p. 144) put forward: 'student performance, including student self-evaluation; the course and the quality of instruction; and the technology being used, including its functionality and user friendliness. Finally, the total online program should be evaluated in terms of its usefulness in the overall institutional context.'

In a collaborative and transformative environment assessment must be summative and formative. Formative to help teachers understand if they could facilitate reflection in order to the students understand their learning progress. Summative to find out if objectives were attained and what follow up to set up. Assessment must be done not only by the teacher but also by the members of the group. Feedback is essential to rearrange strategies. Assessment must take into account the number of messages sent, the quality of the discussion online. The outcome of the tasks proposed are also important. The problem of cheating may exist but if participants are responsible they will understand that it will become a problem for them.

Sometimes something not important for the teacher may be very important to the members of the group.

Assessment depends on clear objectives, contents and the requisites on technology of every participants. Participation is crucial to implement a learner-centred course and evaluation must be individual.

Final thoughts

Computer mediated communication is a growing phenomenon. Many foresee the end of traditional classes, while others foresee the change of classes to an online platform and therefore the end of universities. That is not true. Virtual learning will not eliminate traditional learning. New approaches, methodologies will appear. Electronic pedagogy can not be reduced to a new platform but challenges new methods. Some suggestions to

achieve the success of an online course according to Pallof and Pratts (1999, p. 160) are: 'honesty, responsiveness, relevance, respect, openness and empowerment.' Participants must feel that their contribution will allow a honest feedback in spite of being so difficult to implement online learning will only occurs if there is an interaction among members of the community. Computer mediated communication is different from others models because it implies responsibility. The different elements must feel members in the process of learning. The teacher must act as an equal and confidentiality is crucial. The members must be free to express their opinions that may be different from the others. In a virtual community every element must be expert in his/her learning. So, each element assumes new responsibilities in the creation of a transformative learning. The development of a virtual community implies new and different capacities involved in its delivery. The creation of a community promotes and encourages knowledge acquisition. It creates a new feeling of learning with others, which has self-synergies.

The future

The traditional model based in the concept that in a classroom teacher and students are isolated from the exterior is not able to prepare the future citizens to live in the knowledge society. Learning mediated by the computer will allow the acquisition of knowledge and the use of digital equipment. The possibility to contact different people in different regions is also important. Self esteem and self confidence is developed and students will be able to solve their problems. All the learning situation must be contextualised in order to allow the transfer to the real world. As it involves technology it is necessary not to forget that technology is a means not an end in itself. As Pallof and Pratts (1999, p. 167) state: 'Online education is not the panacea that will cure the ills of education today. However, if facilitated in a way that incorporates community into the process, it is a way to promote a generation of empowered learners who can successfully navigate the demands of a knowledge society.'

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