

Chapter XXV

Frustration in Virtual Learning Environments

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ABSTRACT

Many language teachers, students, and institutions of virtual learning environments are well acquainted with the feelings of loneliness and frustration that many students experience due to the fact that many virtual language courses base their methodology on simply uploading the material into the virtual classroom. Teachers should be aware of the learning process itself; that is, they shouldn't talk only about new learning technologies for second language acquisition but also of new methodologies. In this chapter, we present some methodological actions that should be avoided in the virtual language classroom and try to suggest ways to improve teachers' online practices. In order to collect data from some students enrolled in English language subjects in their degree course (English Philology and Mechanical Engineering at University Rovira i Virgili, Tarragona, Spain), a questionnaire was created. This chapter is part of the project PID08-PROFID, which receives financial support from the Institut de Ciències de l'Educació (URV).

INTRODUCTION

As is well known, e-learning or online instruction can be defined as learning using a computer that is connected to a network. According to students' opinions, online instruction can be a very exciting experience or an incredible nightmare. It all depends on the methodological aspects of the

course. This study concentrates on a particular sort of e-learning enabled by free Internet technology: the Open Source software package Moodle. It tries to identify and define some bad practices found in some virtual language courses that may be the cause of considerable frustration and stress to second-language students. To do so, this chapter has been organized into three main parts:

1. The first part introduces the topic and then briefly defines and describes what some authors believe to be the characteristics of a good virtual course.
2. The second part is divided into two sections.
 - 2.1. The first section describes the problems that students may find in a virtual language course.
 - 2.2. In the second section, a questionnaire is presented. This questionnaire was answered by two groups of university students who were enrolled in two different *English Language* subjects at University Rovira i Virgili, Tarragona. The purpose of this questionnaire was for the students to reflect on what they considered to be bad practices in their virtual language courses.
3. Finally, a section with the conclusion.

BACKGROUND

Moodle was designed on the basis of various pedagogical principles (“social constructionist pedagogy”) to help educators create effective online learning communities (<http://moodle.org>); it is a course management system, or learning management system, designed to help teachers create online courses. This new type of learning management has allowed many universities to implement e-learning in their PhD and master’s degree courses. It has also fostered lifelong learning for those students who, for personal reasons, are not able to study for a degree at a university. Many studies of these students (see www.uoc.edu) show that their main reason for not being able to study for a degree is lack of time. The use of e-learning in university (and other) environments provides students with a 24-hour learning system, seven days a week.

Nowadays, the number of distance courses is growing, and consequently, distance education

is being discussed at various educational levels (see the enormous number of discussion lists on e-learning on the Internet). Most of these debates coincide with the idea that distance education, generally speaking, seems to improve our learning experience. In the specific field of language acquisition, the virtual learning experience has broadened in many different ways, and has opened new fields of experimentation, research, and study. Nevertheless, as teachers and users of these technologies, we must accept that it is still in the first stages of development, implementation, and above all, use, so it still has great potential for transforming the teaching and learning methodology that we know nowadays. Nevertheless, because it is still in its early stages, it also has many negative points.

In his article *Bases pedagógicas de e-learning*, Cabero (2006) summarizes in Table 1 the main advantages and disadvantages of e-learning.

One of the most interesting facts about this table is that all its elements can be extrapolated to virtual language learning, and even new elements can be added in both sides. In virtual second language learning, two of the most acknowledged advantages are the unlimited use of writing in the target language as well as the large amount of “real” texts to improve the reading skill. Also, the most acknowledged disadvantage is the lack of oral practice and small listening (Galloway, 2007).

Nowadays, it seems that most researchers are focusing on establishing what is the best software for Web design and what is the friendliest e-learning environment. Very few are starting to question the teaching methodologies that a virtual teacher should use, or as Warschauer and Meskill (2000) define it, the “humanware” needed for a virtual language class:

The key to successful use of technology in language teaching lies not in hardware or software but in “humanware”: our human capacity as teachers to plan, design and implement effective educational

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