Chapter 54
Pre–Service Teachers' Perceptions of the Effectiveness of a Virtual Learning Environment to Support a Learner–Centred Approach:
A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the research was to apply a qualitative study approach to explore pre-service teachers' perspectives towards a virtual learning environment to establish the reasons to determine its effectiveness to support learner-centered approach. The population of the research included a total of 94 pre-service teachers, studying the last year of the Degree in Primary Education. The qualitative sample of the study was theoretical sampling, systematic, non-probabilistic, sequential, and cumulative. Qualitative data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews. The findings suggested participants' positive perspectives towards the VLE to support learner-centred approach in which they were placed at the centre of the learning process, created knowledge, and had the opportunity to develop an important set of skills needed in the current society and for lifelong learning. It was favoured a constructivist learning in a constructivist environment that involved the students in the development of knowledge having an active role.

INTRODUCTION

The intent of this research is to contribute to the overall knowledge base about best practices in Higher Education, Technology and the Learner-Centred pedagogical approach. For many years, teachers have assumed the responsibility of the whole teaching-learning process, being the only ones with the role of communicating knowledge and deciding the learning objectives and contents that students had to meet (Hancock, Bray & Nason, 2003).

Traditional face-to-face lessons were usually used as the primary and only mean of that communication, and learning and teaching materials were broken down into small quantities according to a logical and given sequence (Mascolo, 2009). That tutor-centred approach was based on the idea of considering teachers as experts, and students as apprentices that had to acquire what teachers transmitted to them unilaterally. That pedagogy was linked and rooted in behaviourism (Allan, 2007; Chall, 2002; Ingleby, Joyce & Powell, 2010) in which learning was just defined as the acquisition of new behaviour or the change in behaviour based on environmental conditions and influences. Learners were involved in methods of direct instruction in which there was a clear emphasis on memorizing knowledge transmitted by teachers, where skills were learned in isolation and learning was assessed in different individual oral and written tests in which learners demonstrated mastery the contents repeating that they had memorized previously. Teachers transmitted knowledge without involving students, without showing them the relevance and meaningfulness of what they were learning (Allan, 2007; Ingleby, Joyce & Powell, 2010). Moreover, that learning approach did not take into account learners' personal necessities or interests, or their different learning styles.

These perspectives on the teaching-learning process have shifted in order to provide the best teaching-learning experience for teachers and students of the 21st century society. There have been a change from teacher-centred approach towards learner-centred one in which students are placed at the centre of the teaching-learning process (Collins & O'Brien, 2003).

If we have previously pointed out that the tutor-centred paradigm was reflected in behaviourism, student-centred approach is related to constructivist instruction that promotes learning in a community in which students and teachers collaborate, and in which students are active participants in the acquisition of knowledge, acquiring the necessary skills to solve problems and reflecting on their learning (Attard, 2010).

According to Grabinger, Dunlap and Duffield (1997) constructivism is characterized for being a kind of instruction in which knowledge is not a product to be accumulated, but an active process that requires the collaboration with peers and teachers. People acquire knowledge in different ways and use that knowledge in a meaningful way according to their lives and needs. Allan (2007) adds that *"(…) it is important to create a learning environment that will enable students to work in learning groups and exchange (…) explore their own ideas and meaning of a topic (…) and to share their work and academic experiences with each other."* (p.54).

From his words we can deduce how constructivism is related to cooperative and collaborative learning, to function in groups in which students work together to meet a common learning objective, sharing their sources and exchanging information and points of view (Dillenbourg, 1999; Lewis & Allan, 2005).

Vygotsky (1978) thinks that students are more capable in higher intellectual levels when they work in a collaborative way, in groups, than when they work individually. This leads to the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) that suggests that students' learning is greater when they work with others or when they collaborate with more capable peers. There are many definitions of learner-

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