

Chapter 13

Social Skills and Online Learning

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ABSTRACT

The concept of online teaching and learning is widely adopted by universities due to the pandemic of COVID-19, which forced them to shift from blending learning (including both direct and remote education) to exclusive online education. Technology has provided a multitude of tools, which can prove very useful in the hands of people who want to serve such a great purpose as education. During the days of the pandemic, where people are isolated, virtual community and virtual learning technology brings people together to experience a sense of educational community in the virtual world. This chapter introduces the reader to the importance for social skill training of the learning communities during times that online learning is the sole type of education, exploring methodologies, tools, and practices that can be used to counterbalance the deficiencies introduced by distance learning methods regarding social skill development.

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INTRODUCTION

The pandemic of COVID-19 has affected people and businesses around the globe, causing crises in physical and mental health, economy and societal welfare (Araújo et al., 2020). As a result, organizations, businesses and institutions of different industries, including education, were impacted as well. The discontinuance of physical presence of both instructors (teachers and lecturers) and students in the classroom caused, *inter alia*, operational issues to Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). HEIs, in order to tackle the effects of the pandemic, implemented remote education through virtual platforms (Izumi et al., 2020).

Increasingly, virtual technology is integrating into the educational field, where instructors and students interact virtually to communicate and produce academic results (Häfner et al., 2013). Courses may be organised in small to medium groups or take the shape of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC), and are underpinned by tools such teleconferencing, Learning Management Systems (LMSs) or Digital Collaboration Platforms (DCPs). HEIs were early adopters of such technology and implemented for blended learning, combining traditional learning with online learning and using digital tools, systems and platforms for learning purposes (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; Gray & Tobin, 2010). Therefore, the concept of online teaching and learning is widely adopted by educational institutions organizations, and students. However, the pandemic of COVID-19 forced them to shift from blending learning, which includes both direct and remote education, to exclusive online education.

These unusual conditions resulted in operational and economic turbulence and confusion of institutions and students, respectively (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2015). Consequently, HEIs came up with new ideas concerning virtual education and implemented innovation in the remote teaching process, including (a) guaranteed students' access to virtual classes, regardless of their location, and (b) enrolment in group activities where they interact and connect with each other (Alexander & Golja, 2007). Throughout this process, quality control was applied, monitoring and analysing the effectiveness of virtual education and redesigning instruction delivery methods and content. Moreover, students seem to enjoy virtual learning, even though they miss face-to-face social interaction with their classmates and instructors (Baxter & Hailey, 2019; Lall & Singh, 2020).

On the other hand, instructors are still struggling to face the challenge of keeping their students' interest during the online classes (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2015). Remote education methods considerably demote the degree to which the instructor is able to perceive the audience's pulse, and react accordingly by e.g., presenting more detailed examples when some concepts have not been well-understood; furthermore, the student's environment (home and computer) includes numerous distraction sources, such as internet surfing, messaging with friends in social media and virtual gaming during classes, and the lack of the ability to monitor/supervise the student's action may increase the student's proneness to engage in such distracting activities. Overall, it is up to the students' self-discipline to stay focused on the online course or be distracted (Bao, 2020; Dhawan, 2020).

While technology-mediated learning can be used to transfer knowledge (e.g., through lectures, assignments etc.) and skills (e.g., through virtual labs), the development of social skills such as person-to-person communication abilities (Smart & Featheringham, 2006), public speaking (Lindner et al., 2021; North et al., 1998) and interviewing (Howard & Gutworth, 2020), which is a core goal of higher level education, needs special attention, and appropriate provisions should be made to avoid significant lags in this area, due to the lack of physical student-to-student and student-to-instructor communication, which is inherent in computer-mediated teaching processes. In this chapter, we explore methodologies,

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