INSTRUCTOR'S PRESENCE IN STUDENT-CENTERED LEARNING

JULIANA PENEVA, VENCISLAV DZHAMBAZOV, DELYAN KEREMEDCHIEV

New Bulgarian University, Department of Informatics

Abstract:

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Introduction

Education, like almost all social spheres, is changed drastically with the development of ICT and the use of Internet. More and more traditional learning tasks are moved to Web and this represents a major pedagogical change. Distance and e-learning nowadays are synonymous, absorbing and modifying practically the whole didactic experience.

Modern learning management systems (LMS) are widely used for adding additional value to the traditional learning process. Learning management systems are trying to offer new tools to facilitate instructors' work. At New Bulgarian University both the full-time and distance forms of education are enhanced by e-learning. Though e-learning is mainly related to distance education it also influences face-to-face teaching. The Moodle NBU platform provides access to e-learning content for each course and supports active communications among instructors and students in both forms of study. The shift from traditional classroom to virtual platform may represent a real challenge for instructors and learners. It is up to the instructor to give the students a perception of community. At the same time students are given opportunities to lead learning activities, participate in discussions, and explore topics that interest them, i.e. a student-centered learning is achieved. Students have the flexibility to learn "anytime and anywhere". They are enabled to choose the way of their learning. The role of interactivity in establishing the instructor's presence and live engagement in the course activities is vital to the effectiveness of student-centered learning. Teacher's visibility and immediacy brings sense of reality and seriousness and at the same time proves students' personal identity.

This investigation employs survey research to assess the influence of instructor's presence and immediacy over students' performance in e-learning classes. The analysis is based on our experience in delivering courses via Moodle both for distance and regular education. In order to enhance understanding of pedagogical processes we developed a proper questionnaire to measure teacher's presence and immediacy. Data were collected over 200 students across different bachelor programs at New Bulgarian University both in full-time and distance forms of studies. Our results and the student's attitude to instructor's presence in student-centered learning are presented in this paper.

Instructor's presence in student-centered learning

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 concentrates on some basic notions and presents a literature review. In Section 3 we describe our questionnaire intended to quantity teacher's presence and immediacy. Section 4 deals with the method of study. Our results are commented in Section5. In the conclusion we summarize our findings.

The Role of Instructor's Presence and Immediacy in E-learning Classes

Student-centered learning (SLC) does not have one universally – accepted definition. Instead researchers unify their opinions - SCL represents a method of learning or teaching that puts the learner at the center [1]. A student-centered learning environment appears to be effective in higher education [2]. Innovative methods of teaching are among the pertinent features of such an environment [3]. These include teaching which:

- aim to promote learning in communication with teachers and other learners;
- take students as active participants in their own learning and encourage skills such as problem-solving, critical thinking, and reflective thinking.

In contrast to traditional education students monitor their learning process, i.e. they choose what to learn, how to learn, and how to assess their own learning [4]. With respect to this we think that the active involvement of teachers in course activities is important for the students' motivation and engagement in the learning process. The role of interactivity in establishing the instructor's presence and live engagement in the course activities is vital to the effectiveness of e-learning. Teacher's visibility and immediacy brings sense of reality and seriousness and at the same time proves students' personal identity.

In this paper we explore how ongoing interactions that occur within a course benefits students' effective learning and cognition. Teacher's presence is defined as "the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educational worthwhile learning outcomes" [5]. It is marked by the instructor's role in e-learning class environments. Teaching immediacy concerns instructor's availability as perceived by the learners [6]. The influence of instructor's

presence and immediacy over students' performance in e-learning classes is examined in [7]. The analysis is based on our experience in delivering courses via different kinds of virtual learning environments both for distance and regular courses. In order to enhance understanding of pedagogical processes in e-learning classes we developed a proper questionnaire survey to measure teacher's presence and immediacy.

Questionnaire for the survey study

The survey comprises three categories of questions concerning:

- demographic information for the participants;
- students' attitude to the e-learning at NBU]
- students' sense of teachers' presence and immediacy

The questionnaire is presented below.

1. Which program of study do you attend: ………………………………

2. What type of educational materials do you prefer: (choose only one)

    - printed books
    - e-books on CD
    - e-books in Internet
    - Other, please specify: …………………………………..

3. Which is the easiest way for you to learn: (choose only one)

    - Reading
    - Being taught
    - Discussing
    - Watching educational video
    - Applying lessons learned
    - Writing down
    - Other, please specify: ……………………………………………

4. Which of the following is the most important for you: (choose only one)

    - Opportunity to choose the most convenient time for training on a course

- Opportunity for self-training
- Opportunity of having an easy access to educational materials
- Opportunity to communicate with a teacher at any time
- Opportunity to discuss the considered subjects with other students

5. To what extent do you agree with the following statements – generally based on your training at NBU:

- Tasks that enhance understanding and learning are assigned

Fully agree	Agree	Can't say	Disagree	Fully disagree

- Learning content and monitoring questions that enhance learning are proposed

Fully agree	Agree	Can't say	Disagree	Fully disagree

- Crucial topics for discussion that enhance learning are presented

Fully agree	Agree	Can't say	Disagree	Fully disagree

- Additional sources of information (articles, books, links) are presented

Fully agree	Agree	Can't say	Disagree	Fully disagree

- Clear time limits for the learning activities that make it easier to organize participation in the course are set

Fully agree	Agree	Can't say	Disagree	Fully disagree

6. The grades you generally get are:

- Lower than expected
- As expected
- Higher than expected

7. To what extent do you find your training useful? (for your future job, present job, personal improvement, etc.)

Very useful	Useful	Can't say	Not very useful	Totally useless

8. What additional attendance classes do you need:

- Presentation of basic topics
- Collective discussion of new ideas and concepts
- Useful change of ideas
- Discussion of crucial ideas and concepts
- Other, please specify: ………………………………………………

9. Gender:

- Male
- Female

10. Age

- 18 – 24
- 25 – 29
- 30 – 34
- 35 – 44
- Over 44

11. Place of residence: …………………………………………

12. Employment status:

- Full- time job
- Part- time job
- Temporary employment
- Student
- Housewife
- Does not work and does not look for a job
- Does not work, actively looks for a job
- Other, please specify: ……………………………

13. : Course Format

Online	Class room based

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Method of study

The goal of this study is to assess the influence of instructor's presence and immediacy over students' performance in e-learning classes. To measure teachers 'presence we devised proper items following the proposed in [8] model. The questionnaire was presented to a random sample of about 200 learners at the end of the fall 2016 academic semester. The characteristics of the sample are:

- a random sample over 200 learners at the end of the Fall 2016 academic semester;

- all students enrolled in online or regular courses at NBU;

- high response rate – 96%;

- demographic data – gender: 66% males and 34% females.

- represents students from different programs and in both full-time and distance forms of study;

- students use the same registration system, LMS Moodle, and have access to the same basic student services.

Caution needs to be applied when interpreting the results as they do not reflect the diversity of school types.

Respondents' demographic information is summarized in Table 1. There were 75 females, 149 males, and 1 unreported. Approximately 118 of the 225 respondents were between the ages 18 and 24 years, 52 were between the ages 25 and 29 years, 30 were between ages 30 and 34 years, 17 were between ages 35 and 44 years and 8 were above 44 years old.127of the respondents has full-time job employment status, 21 has temporary employment, 7 has part-time job, 53 were students, 2 housewives, 12 does not work and actively looks for a job, 3 with other job employment status.

Participants in the study responded to a questions concerning their sense of instructors presence.
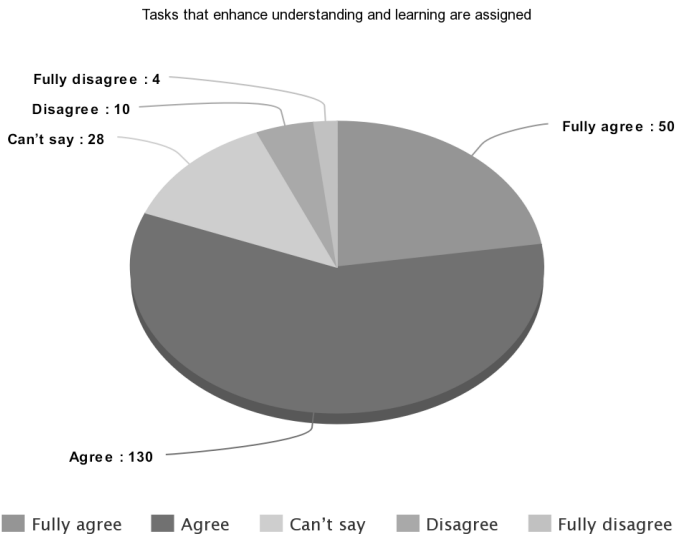
	Frequency	Percent
Gender:		
Male	149	66,22
Female	75	33,33
Missing	1	0,44
Age		

The Title of the Section

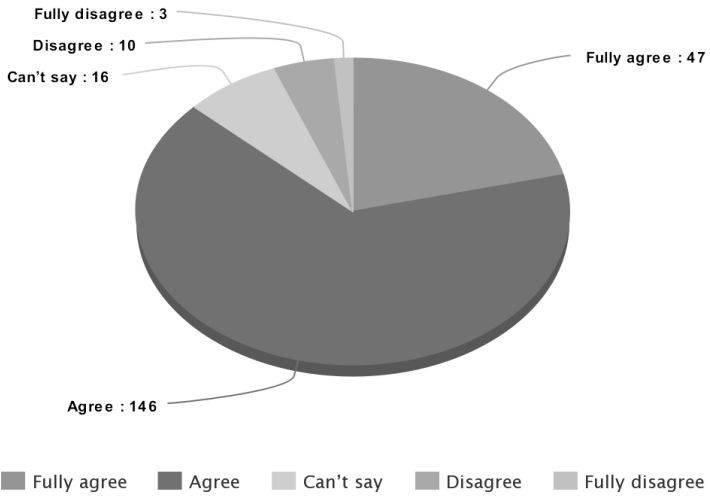| 18 – 24	118	52,44
25 – 29	52	23,11
30 – 34	30	13,33
35 – 44	17	7,56
over 44	8	3,56
missing	0	0,00
Employment status		
Full- time job	127	56,44
Temporary employment	21	9,33
Part- time job	7	3,11
Student	53	23,56
Housewife	2	0,89
Does not work and does not look for a job	0	0,00
Does not work, actively looks for a job	12	5,33
Other	3	1,33

Table 1 Demographic data

Results

The investigation of students' sense concerning teachers' presence and immediacy is based on the answers of Question 5 from the Questionnaire for this survey study.
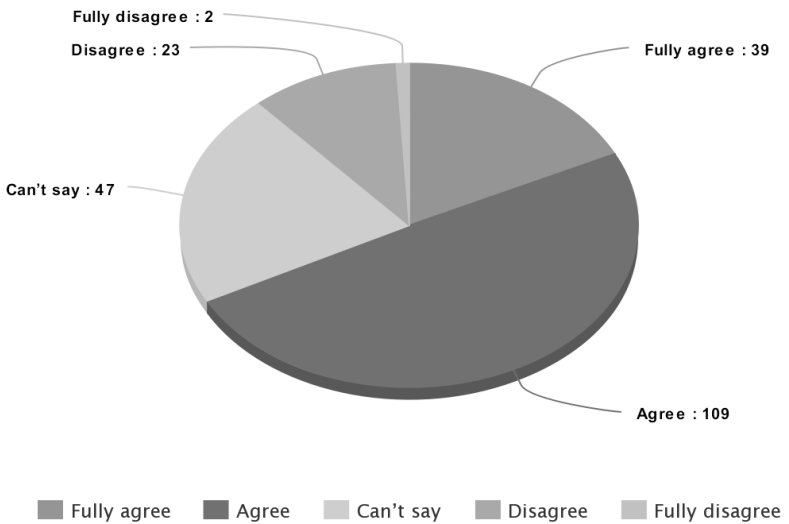
Tasks that enhance understanding and learning are assigned

Fully disagree : 4
Disagree : 10
Can't say : 28
Fully agree : 50
Agree : 130

■ Fully agree   ■ Agree   ■ Can't say   ■ Disagree   ■ Fully disagree

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Learning content and monitoring questions that enhance learning are proposed

Fully disagree : 3
Disagree : 10
Can't say : 16
Fully agree : 47
Agree : 146

| Fully agree | Agree | Can't say | Disagree | Fully disagree |

Crucial topics for discussion that enhance learning are presented

Fully disagree : 2
Disagree : 23
Fully agree : 39
Can't say : 47
Agree : 109

| Fully agree | Agree | Can't say | Disagree | Fully disagree |

The Title of the Section

Additional sources of information (articles, books, links) are presented
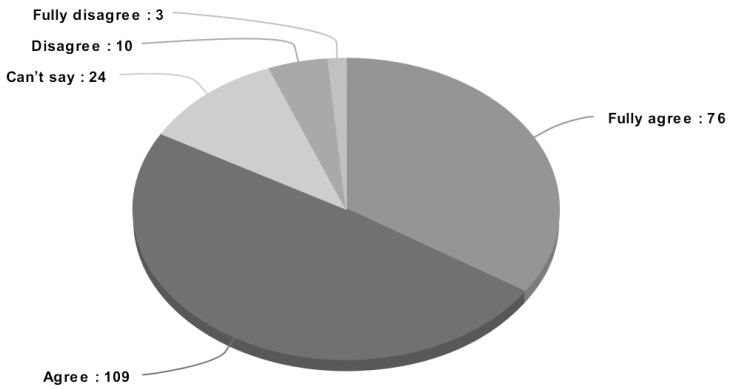
Fully disagree : 3
Disagree : 10
Can't say : 24
Fully agree : 76
Agree : 109

Fully agree · Agree · Can't say · Disagree · Fully disagree

Clear time limits for the learning activities that make it easier to organize participation in the course are set

Fully disagree : 7
Disagree : 10
Can't say : 19
Fully agree : 68
Agree : 118

Fully agree · Agree · Can't say · Disagree · Fully disagree

Conclusions

In this paper we discuss the role of instructor's presence and immediacy in e-learning classes. Our experience shows that ongoing interactions occurring within the course are central to the students' motivation and engagement in the learning process. Communications with students such as directing class discussions, positive and constructive timely feedbacks, emotional responses, etc. motivates students' learning. The active teacher's participation in course activities benefits students' effective learning and cognition.

To stimulate participation we apply some practices:

- the syllabus presents the rules of participation in discussions;
- any discussion lasts for a week;
- ask learners to use the provided learning content;
- ask learners to comment on other postings.

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Authors' Information

Juliana Peneva, PhD, Assoc. Prof, New Bulgarian University, 21 Montevideo St. 1618 Sofia, Bulgaria, jpeneva@nbu.bg.

Major Fields of Scientific Research: database systems, software engineering, information systems, e-learning

Vencislav Dzhambazov, PhD, Assoc. Prof, New Bulgarian University, 21 Montevideo St. 1618 Sofia, Bulgaria, venci@nbu.bg

Major Fields of Scientific Research: e-learning, web technologies, multimedia

Delyan Keremedchiev, PhD Student, New Bulgarian University, 21 Montevideo St. 1618 Sofia, Bulgaria, delyan.keremedchiev@gmail.com

Major Fields of Scientific Research: e-learning, web-enabled information systems