Using Google Sites Technology to Teach Undergraduate Courses: Ethical Considerations

Irina Dudina, Volgograd State University, Russia

ABSTRACT

The paper reports the outcomes of the collaborative use of Google Sites in teaching undergraduate courses in Economic Terminology at Volgograd State University. Based on a students' survey, that allowed the project team to collect relevant data grouped according to four criteria: accessibility, interactive capacity, problem solving facilities, and feasibility of online tasks, as well as on a teachers' questionnaire where page creation potential, interactive capacity, problem solving facilities, and task formulation options were assessed. The findings demonstrated that (1) Google Sites may considerably support instructors of undergraduate courses in their efforts to motivate students’ learning and empower them with interactive course materials; (2) virtual education community needs experiential ethic norms for responsible behavior more than prescribed administrat- ive rules of online collective action.

Keywords: Collective Action, E-Learning Environment, Google Sites Technology, Institutional Infrastructure, Learning Management System, Virtual Education Community

INTRODUCTION

There is a three-year history of using Google Sites in different educational settings (Google, 2011). Educators agree that these tools can spark teachers’ and learners’ imagination with examples of innovative ways of teaching and learning as well as of sharing ideas more quickly and getting things done more effectively (Cisler, 2011; Surhone, Tennoe, & Henssonow, 2010; McDonough, 2011). Having access to the sites produced for educators and by educators does not require hardware or software to install or maintain, since everything is delivered through a standard Google Chrome Web browser anytime and from anywhere.

However, using websites systematically requires development of a concept of ethic institutional behavior within a virtual education community. The rules and norms of such behavior are vital for collaborative online learning, be it quality of content, pedagogies or overall impact of the technology on the institution. As Anderson and Simpson pointed out, “online sites support complex discourses and multiple relationships; they cross physical,
cultural and linguistic boundaries” (2007, p. 129). This perspective is totally different from the efforts that have been so far undertaken in Russian universities to establish an administrative framework for academics’ contributions to the university e-learning platforms. The use of such platforms has not proved to be fruitful when there is little incentive for faculty to participate in a prescribed collective action. There is even less enthusiasm on the part of learners who experience dated methods of teaching applied to e-learning environment. To solve the problem of the transition to effective online cooperation as well as to any blended purposeful interaction, universities need to create an institutional framework for the e-learning environment, in which performance would be guided with something more than administrative prescriptions (Boucouvalas, 2003).

The main ethic issues that e-communities in the process of constructing such environments face are copyright protection, balance of individual freedom and rights of learners, disparity of learning opportunities and pedagogical culture of interaction (Brey, 2006; Lin, 2007; Goodfellow & Hewling, 2005, p. 364). If these issues are properly addressed, the endeavor may result in the creation of a virtual community with a new blended approach to upgrading teaching and learning for the purpose of making exchange of information mutually beneficial for students and faculty (Bruner, 1985).

At this point for Russian academic community with its high level of computer literacy the concept of ethical e-learning environment becomes critical. While supervision, regulation and coordination of e-learning platforms are performed on a regular basis, we are still in the process of institutional transition to computer-mediated academic communication, in which teachers and students would share responsibility for learning goals, course content and teaching methods. Economic and institutional incentives for faculty that contribute to university e-learning platforms are another big issue. International comparisons index reveals that Russia’s higher education ranks 2, 99 against G7 countries average 7, 5 in Economic Incentive and Institutional Regime. In ICT index it ranks 6, 19 against the average for G7 countries of 8, 5 (Kastueva-Jean, 11). Currently in most Russian state-owned universities the faculty workload reaches 24 hours per week and there is no system of financial rationale for the utilization of ICT in educational programs, though instructors are required to integrate technology into the teaching process. One of the recent advancements in this area are Federal Legal Acts on intellectual property rights ownership (Civil Code) and the establishment of Technology Transfer Offices that began providing legal and regulatory infrastructure for commercialization of intellectual property. When Google Sites technology was discussed as a tool for creating a manageable blended learning community we at Volgograd State had to answer several questions concerning its adaptation to the Russian academic setting with its traditional resistance to extra efforts that may not pay off in the near future. How is the Google Sites tool different from the university e-learning platform? In which kind of courses may we use this technology? How will the site technology change our working practice? What benefits will it bring for students and professors?

Volgograd State University is a medium-sized higher education institution in the South of Russia. It has 14,000 students in the traditional Russian “Specialist” along with the Bachelor’s and Master’s programs. The idea of integrating Google Sites into a university teaching and learning environment came as the result of several factors, first and foremost, the dissatisfaction with the rigidity of the University e-learning platform. Externally, due to the shift to the Bologna three-cycle degree system (Bachelor–Master–PhD) Russian higher education is experiencing changes in the structure and content, leading to budget cuts. Russia joined the Bologna process in 2003 (Zgaga, 2006, pp. 36, 39, 143) and since then has been transforming its higher education to make it compatible with the Bologna recommendations. The content transformation is yet to happen, but all the structural foundations are in place (The Russian Federation, 2009).
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