Factors Necessary for Engaging Preservice Teachers Studying in Virtual and Blended Courses

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ABSTRACT
In their encounter with a virtual or blended learning environment, students are liable to perceive the situation as a challenge or as a threat. The physical separation between teacher and students may lead to “transactional distance,” which in turn can cause a sense of threat and create anger, gaps in understanding, or misconceptions among the learners about themselves and about the learning process. Students may grasp the situation as a “challenge” or a “threat.” The aim of the article is to determine the factors necessary for engaging preservice teachers studying in virtual and blended courses, which are critical to feelings of challenge and threat among these students. The sample included 578 participants in a mixed-method study. The present study found that differential interpersonal communication, feedback, and forums may lead to a decrease in feelings of threat and an increase in the sense of challenge. Some learners need only intellectual interaction; others need both intellectual and emotional interaction.

KEYWORDS
Blended Course, Challenge, Feedback, Feelings, Interactions, Preservice Teachers, Teaching Presence, Threat, Transactional Distance, Virtual Course

INTRODUCTION
The study examined two learning environments: virtual and blended courses. In their encounter with the virtual or blended learning environment, students are liable to grasp the situation as a challenge or as a threat. A situation perceived as positive stimulates activity, whereas a situation perceived as stressful is liable to provoke an emotional response of challenge or threat. When an individual feels threatened, their feelings of uncertainty and lack of self-efficacy are strengthened, and they may renounce carrying out tasks, focusing on defending themselves and preserving the existing situation. This can lead to poor performance of the tasks to which they must attend. The physical separation between teacher and students can lead to “transactional distance” between them, which in turn can lead to a sense of threat, produce anger, gaps in understanding, or misconceptions among learners about themselves and about the learning process. In the current study we asked the question: what are the critical causes for feelings of challenge and threat among student teachers enrolled in virtual and blended courses, and how can these factors be addressed?
THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Learning Environments

Researchers (Brandt, 2015; Salyers, Carter, Myers & Barrett, 2014; Scott, Ribeiro, Burns, Danyluk & Bodnaresko, 2017; Wells, De Lange & Fieger, 2008; Zilka, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2016, 2017) found that integrating virtual environments in the learning process may lead to the realization of pedagogical visions to nurture autonomous students who realize their individual potential. The OECD defined three basic components of lifelong learning (LLL): 1

1. Autonomous learning
2. The acquisition of interactive tools that enable meaningful interaction, such as language, a digital environment, etc.
3. Fostering interpersonal interaction and collaboration.

Bransford, Brown and Cocking (2000) proposed a model in which an effective learning process is the meeting of three worlds: the world of knowledge, the learner’s world, and the world of evaluation. The three worlds give rise to different types of sensations:

1. Feelings based on knowledge and focusing on the material being learned (knowledge-centered).
2. Feelings that relate to the learners and focus on their emotional and motivational needs as far as the learning process is concerned, and their perception of themselves (learner-centered).

Following Piaget, Papert, and others, the constructivist approach, which regards learning as “structuring”, gained influence. The basic premise of this approach is that the way we perceive the world is not necessarily the objective reality itself, but a subjective reality that depends on the individual’s perception and understanding (Fraundorf, 1995; Perkins, 1993; Toomey & Ketterer, 1995).

Vygotsky (1989) saw the learning process as interpersonal and not merely a personally cognitive one. Vygotsky explained learning as the cognitive acquisition of symbol systems during the personal interaction between learners and their colleagues, until the symbols are absorbed and become available to the learners, who are able to use them. This suggests a relationship between the learning concept as a constructivist process and the learning concept as a social process. Organizational researches (Argyris & Schon, 1996; Weick, 1997) suggest viewing the team, group, class, and organization, as independent entities that can learn and grow beyond the development of the individuals who make them up.

The present study examined two learning environments, a virtual one and a blended one. A blended course refers to the mixture of face-to-face and virtual learning. The learners meet face-to-face regularly, the course has an active website, discussions are held in a forum on the course website and continue face-to-face, etc. This type of combination is expected to enrich the relationship between the teacher and the learner within the learners’ community. Face-to-face meetings should enable immediate, unmediated interaction, based on verbal communication and non-verbal messages such as facial expressions and body language, helping the teacher to call for significant interaction and identify situations that require a response to signs of distress, embarrassment, and difficulties related to the material taught, to the class fabric, and the like (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison & Archer, 2001; Garrison & Kanuke, 2004; Groen & Li, 2004).

Virtual learning is a digital teaching system that connects students and teachers who are physically separated from each other. The virtual environment enables learners to enhance the learning process, and provides, generally, fertile ground for exploration learning, combined texts (visual, audio, verbal), the integration of tasks that require high levels of thinking, and so on. As a result of the dynamic and diverse possibilities it offers, a learning environment may develop that encourages coping with
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