Lone Wolves in Distance Learning?
An Empirical Analysis of the Tendency to Communicate Within Student Groups

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ABSTRACT

Distance learners are often referred to as ‘lone wolves’ who, as a result of the geographical distance and other system-specific characteristics of distance learning programs, place little emphasis on communicating with the university and, in particular, their fellow students. This article, following a demonstration of the developments in the field of distance learning, focuses on the communication patterns of distance learners. As part of a quantitative study, the students of a German distance university answered a survey on this topic. A significant result was the division of the students into three groups according to their tendency to communicate: Power communicators, regular communicators, and the lone wolves. Moreover, a shift within the student cohorts can be identified: students in later semesters prefer synchronous communication as opposed to the asynchronous use of emails. Learning analytics and a shift in the role of academic support towards mentoring can support an increase in the tendency to communicate and, ultimately, in student motivation and performance.

KEYWORDS

Blended Learning, Communication, Computer-Supported Collaborative Learning (CSCL), Digitalization, Distance Course, Distance Learning, Learning Analytics, Mentoring

INTRODUCTION

Distance learning programmes have existed since the end of the 1960s: The United Kingdom’s Open University was the first institution to offer such programmes in Europe. Since the 1990s, technology-based information, communication and interaction tools have been implemented increasingly in this market to reduce the gap between distance instructors and students (Walter, 2017).

For the combination of both approaches – the integration of web-based technology into distance learning - the term blended learning has become widely adopted (Pima et al, 2018).

The didactic concept is ‘a sequenced learning arrangement with classroom and media-based phases of independent study’ (Fogolin, 2017, p. 9). With the digitalisation of learning environments, this is known as computer supported collaborative learning (CSCL) (cf. Hoban, 2016). In CSCL environments, groups of students are supported by information and communication technology.
Access to shared material, communication (synchronous or asynchronous) of knowledge as well as the solution of a task (for example, a term paper or presentation) are among the minimum requirements.

In conclusion, several authors (e.g., Premchaiswadi & Poruhan, 2015; Stoytcheva, 2017) have demonstrated in their research that, despite some initial difficulties in introducing CSCL, this form of learning has increased student motivation (Waha & Davis, 2014), caused by the idea of belonging to a ‘learning community’ that highlights interpersonal relationships in addition to the content-related aspects of CSCL environments. However according to Fischer and Vogel (2018), simply imitating offline learning scenarios should be avoided, as it prevents the full potential of digital possibilities from being exploited; this phenomenon is called the ‘imitation trap’.

Student numbers in blended learning courses are increasing rapidly (Fogolin, 2017). The following advantages for the participants arise as the result of various studies from the didactic concepts:

- Education can occur independently of time and place. Guri-Rosenblit (2005) calls this a ‘Barrier-Removal-Mission’. This criterion is often relevant to older or working individuals;
- E-learning facilitates access to libraries and other resources;
- Synchronous online communication increases learning communication and strengthens social contacts.

In contrast, Stoytcheva (2017) and Dutschmann (2018) point out that the mere use and availability of multimedia and e-learning does not guarantee pedagogical success. It is therefore necessary to deal with the principles of learning communication and interaction. In essence, individuals can learn either alone or in groups.

Semantically, there is a distinction to be made between the terms ‘communication’ and ‘interaction’: ‘Interaction’ refers to the ‘pure exchange of information’ (Meißner, 2008, p. 311), whereas ‘communication’ is understood to mean the sending and receiving of messages. Communication can therefore be seen as special form of interaction which is of fundamental importance for joint learning – for both face-to-face learning and distance learning. At the same time, Meißner (2008, p. 311) states that in ‘virtual study groups, even non-communicative actions, such as uploading and downloading work material can have an effect’. Interestingly, Held (2018) defines the communicative actions between humans as ‘Interaktion’ [interaction] and the interplay between humans and computers as ‘Interaktivität’ [interactivity]. Both terms are jointly referred to in English as ‘interaction’. In this research, the definition of Meißner, the communication among students, which may be supported by further activities (interactivity), shall be considered.

But why is student interaction and communication important? Krämer et al. (2018) outline three reasons: By interacting, students can:

- Verbalise what they know and what they do not know;
- Discuss their points of view;
- Develop their knowledge through mutual processes.

Thus, the extent of student interactions with each other and with academic staff is critical to learning success (Perera & Richardson, 2010). Hence, this research aims at analysing the pattern of interaction and communication that distance university students show in different semesters.

In more detail, this study focuses on the following research question:

1. Which channels of communication do distance learners use?
2. Do distance learners communicate with their fellow students and work in self-organised groups more intensively?
Cross-Institutional Blended Learning in Teacher Education: A Case Study
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