eLEARNING: CULTURAL DETERMINANTS OF A VIRTUAL CLASS

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Abstract

What could one define as a usual mode of realisation when talking about class? Is there a frame that determines class as traditional or classical? What can be changed due to implementation and consequently influence of technique and technology in educational process? Virtual class as elementary organisational unit of educational process can be analysed from different aspects. However, most of these attitudes are in a way burdened by inheritance and usual modes of realisation. At the same time, inheritance doesn't imply its strict implementation within concrete circumstances. Relationship student – teacher is an apparent constant in the process while other values vary in quantity and quality. Virtualisation of a class puts some of its determinants within frames of probable measures that could significantly influence its realisation. In the process class overtakes stochastic characteristics. Importance of cultural determinants reflects in a fact that eLearning isn't limited in time and location. In such manner traditional class in virtual frames looses its cultural boundaries. Paper analyses students' and teachers' attitudes towards possible cultural, moral and ethical relationships during eLearning's realisation as a process.

Key word: eLearning, cultural inheritance, ICT, moral inheritance, learning style

1. Introduction

The application of ICT in the past two decades has greatly influenced the process of learning. eLearning, because of its numerous advantages, has become a very popular way of realizing better and more efficient learning and teaching. Teaching as a process can be studied from two aspects: the aspect of learning and the aspect of teaching. Thus, teaching is made up of teaching and learning as two supplementary processes. The basic elements which actively carry out the process of teaching are the student and the teacher.

Teaching aids mostly determine the traditional teaching technology. Specific quality of the content and the goals determine these teaching aids: The purpose of teaching aids has always been to make teaching more effective and better. The application of IT has changed this relationship. The use of computers in teaching is no longer determined by the content in the way teaching aids have been. The computer becomes a teaching tool and it is an active participant of the process. This evolution is changing the education landscape and has led to new approaches in learning and training. It can be said that the Internet has enabled new possibilities to access knowledge.

„eLearning is a new form of pedagogy for learning in the 21st Century. E-teachers are eLearning instructional designers, facilitators of interaction and subject matter experts. The roles of e-

teachers are to enhance learners' cognitive engagement and interaction. This is achieved by using the benefits of computer mediated communication – greater accessibility and adaptability." (J. Owens, „The Aspects of eLearning“)

2. The eTutor in the virtual classroom

The eTutor is an online instructor in a virtual classroom. His role is much closer to classroom training. Just how close is explained by Peter McLintock, eLearning Director for Global Knowledge: „It is important to remember here that on-line tutoring is not really different to classroom tutoring. It may be a new medium, but the best instructors are still the best instructors. eTutors, as with classroom tutors, must be skilled and have proven knowledge with the subject matter. They must have good communication skills, be personable, adaptable and confident, with the course content as well as the delivery tool“. (Shepherd, C.: „ eLearning's greatest hits“, 2003) Julie Linn is an eLearning Manager for the Training Foundation and a highly experienced trainer of e-tutors and she declared: "The eTutor needs to be positive: to build report, generate enthusiasm, maintain interest and help when the going gets tough; he must be proactive: to make things happen, be a catalyst (if necessary) to help learners get going on a course, to recognize when action needs to be taken and take it; he must also be patient: to understand the needs of each learner as well as the group and to adapt to their timeframes as far as possible; he also needs to be persistent: to keep at things, stop learners from drifting away, and deal with any technical or other problems." Jane Moore is an eTutor on the Training Foundation team: "An effective e-tutor is likely to be from training, tutoring or teaching background with expertise either in his own subject, IT or soft skills."

3. The eLearners in the virtual classroom

All eLearners are not equal. There are two kinds of eLearners: those that just love eLearning and those that love to work in a team and find it very hard to get motivated when they have to rely on their own self-discipline. The eLearners, who like eLearning, are not unhappy working alone, but they take advantage of any opportunities to communicate online with their fellow learners. The other group of eLearners feels very frustrated finding themselves in the situation when they don't know what to do and have no one to ask. Perhaps eLearning suits some learning styles more than others. There is no doubt that learners differ in how they like to learn. There is also a body of evidence pointing to the fact that some people prefer the social dynamics of the online world to the classroom. eLearning is an easy option, because they don’t have to physically sit in a group and speak in front of a large number of people. They feel much more comfortable and at ease communicating over a computer, whether it’ll be e-mailing, submitting documents, or taking part in an online chat. We cannot forget the role of self-motivation, the importance of self-motivation, which is a vital in eLearning. There are no set hours or classes, and the eLearner needs to be able to find the motivation from somewhere to force himself to sit at the computer and read. He must be also conscientious, so to keep up with the course work as much as he can, as he often needs to

do online group work, he would not like to let his fellow group workers down by not being up to speed.

Perhaps it would help us to know just what it is about some learners that make them better suited to eLearning than others. It would also help if we could make eLearning more suitable for the majority of learners, so we could all take advantage of its benefits, but more of that to come.

The issue of study of psychologists and pedagogues is the mutual relationship of students within a classroom: the way they address each other, their ways of communication, humour, positive and negative attitudes towards themselves and others. When we talk about virtual classroom, students don't know who is behind the screen, but they communicate with each other. So there is a question: are there worrisome ethical issues in eLearning? For the purpose of this study some ethical issues that could accompany eLearning have been researched through this survey. The goal is to avoid ethically problematic design or behaviours. So we try to point out some examples.

Privacy issues. Online devices can invade privacy. Guidelines need to be set. They need to be clear and they should be enforced.

Uniformity of access. Ethical constructs that deal with justice and the administration of justice suggest that all individuals who participate in an activity should be able to do so with equal chances of success.

Non-biased, culturally equitable delivery and expectations. Signs and symbols can be subtle, and people may not be aware that a particular sign, symbol, or content item could be offensive to some groups. It is important to expand the rules of proper eLearning behaviours and to make sure that students are not posting or sending invasive or offensive items to fellow students.

Languages barriers. The e-tutors are ethically obligated to provide training, mentoring and support to learners who may not have the background or language skills to succeed in eLearning.

Posting and other concerns. "Netiquette" notwithstanding, impulse control is often lessened in an environment where one feels safe and fairly anonymous. One way to combat rudeness in the discussion board is to attach a real identity and impose social control.

Cyber – bullying and cyber-stalking. "The Internet has been described as transforming society by providing person-to-person communication, similar to the telegraph and telephone as well as operating as a mass medium, like radio and television before it." (Bargh & McKenna, 2004). Human behaviour on the Internet and related technologies, such as mobile phones, has been found to have both positive and negative consequences. Positive aspects such as socially anxious individuals being able to communicate better and deeper self-disclosure between people have been claimed (Kraut et al., 2002; McKenna & Barge, 1999). However, negative consequences of this technology use, such as the encouragement of antisocial behaviour and increased loneliness, have also been reported (Donchi & Moore, 2004; Lee & Leets, 2002). Speed of communication and accessibility of information are seen as beneficial, but the Internet also has a "dark side".
(Marilyn A. Campbell, 2005)

4. Research and survey

This paper studies cultural features and behaviour into virtual classroom 274 examinees. the authors analyze the attitudes of students and teachers about issues concerning different cultural, moral and ethical relations in the realization of the teaching – learning process. This are questions posed in questionnaire:

1. What is your gender?
2. What year of study have you enrolled?
3. Do you have a daily access to the computer and the Internet?
4. Do you use the Internet in completing the faculty assignments (homework, seminars etc.)?
5. Do you use a computer and the Internet for learning (adopting a learning content)?
6. For what purpose do you use the Internet most frequently?
7. Do you feel the Internet is a safe medium?
8. Do you find confident the contents browsed on the Internet and used for educational purposes?
9. Have you ever used a false identity on the Internet?
10. Have you ever insulted anyone on the Internet by means of his religious, national, racial, gender or sexual affiliation?
11. If you have insulted someone, as stated above, was it on purpose?
12. Have you ever hacked the web sites or someone's email over the Internet?
13. How do you feel about saying: "Don't do anything online you wouldn't do in a real world environment"?
14. Are you willing to verbally confront someone on the Internet?
15. Have you ever placed some kind of disinformation over the Internet?
16. Have you ever uploaded on the Internet something that hasn't been created by you?
17. Have you ever published on the Internet your own paper signed by false/someone else's name?
18. Have you ever published on the Internet some/someone's confidential (secret) data?
19. Have you ever downloaded from the Internet some content or its segments and represented them as your own work?
20. Do you consider yourself sufficiently responsible and conscientious when communicating on the Internet?
21. Do you consider people in general to be sufficiently educated for proper communication over the Internet?
22. How often do you actually quote the Internet sources you use in seminar papers, homework, presentations etc?
23. Do you believe usage of the Internet in educational purposes strengthens the effect of your responsibility?
24. Would you, without any prejudices, participate in online course together with students of other races, religious persuasions, national affiliation etc?
25. You may, if you wish, make your own comment, notification or observation you feel is important for the research.

5. Explanation of results instead of Conclusion

Results of the analysis indicate almost all examinees, app 98%, posses their own computer respectively have a daily access to the Internet. The majority of students, app 95.41%, use the computer and the Internet always or regularly when accomplishing their faculty assignments.

These results indicate importance of proper and timely education of students in accurate online behaviour and usage of the Internet. Also, a great percentage of students use the Internet in learning. 83.28% of students use it always or frequently. All the above mentioned leads to a conclusion the Internet became an extremely important item of a higher education system. When questioned in what purpose do they usually use the Internet, 53.11% of examinees answered they use it generally for information purposes, followed by entertainment that was chosen by 16.72% of students. Considering the examinees' attitudes towards the Internet safety most of them – 48.52% is neutral, respectively they don't consider the Internet neither safe nor uncertain medium, 33.78% consider the Internet safe or fairly safe, while only 17.38% of them believe the Internet to be fairly or completely uncertain medium. The above stated indicate the examinees' attitude towards the ethics of other Internet users who influence its safety by their own actions. Though it has been noticed that less then half a student consider the Internet to be generally safe medium, 68.86% of them stated they always or frequently believe in contents browsed on the Internet for educational purposes. Besides, they also indicate their capability of making a difference between relevant and irrelevant, respectively relevant (accurate, true) and irrelevant (inaccurate, untrue) information. Further on, the results of the analysis indicate that precisely 60% of students have never used a false identity on the Internet that proves their ethical behaviour. Even the higher percentage, 88.20%, answered they have never insulted others on the Internet by any kind of means. Still, out of 35 examinees who answered positively, 29 declared their insult was on purpose. The same percentage of students, as in false identity issue, 88.20% answered they have never hacked some web sites or interfered with other peoples' email that also proves students' ethical behaviour. Nevertheless, this doesn't indicate a real situation, but imbalance between examinees' wishes and passiveness and/or technical ignorance for that sort of operation. The question posed about students' aspirations towards the following statement: "Never do something online you wouldn't do in a real world environment" the allocation of answers was as follows: only 5.57% examinees do not support statement; 6.56% cannot provide a concrete answer; 13.44% examinees partially disagree; 21.31% partially agree, while more then a half, 52.79% support the statement. This kind of answers' allocation should support positive behaviour of examinees as persons who responsibly use medium such as Internet. When questioned about verbal confrontation over the Internet, the majority of examinees, 55.74% haven't provided a concrete answer, but instead have concluded that sort of behaviour is situation related. It can be presumed that were the question posed as "Would the examinees verbally confront someone face to face", the answers would have been different so there is imbalance between these answers and the ones given on the previous question, where majority students claim they would never do something online they wouldn't do in a real time environment as well. 86.56% stated they have never published a disinformation on the Internet. Similar percentage (90.82%) claims they have never published other author's work signed by their own name, nor have they published their own works signed by others (85.25). In the same context, 96.72% of examinees answered they have never published on the Internet some/someone's confidential data. When asked have they ever downloaded some contents or

their segments from the Internet and presented them as their own work or for educational purposes, 60.33% of students answered negatively. It is obvious these answers support those given on a control question by which examinees should have stated how regularly they quote Internet sources used in their papers. Even 95.08% of students always or sometimes quote those sources proving they actually don't represent the Internet contents as their own papers. It was therefore pointed out the examinees actually sincerely answer the posed questions. Regarding the responsible and conscientious behaviour when communicating on the Internet, most of examinees, 86.56% believe they actually behave that way. Only 7.87% of students stated they never or only occasionally behave responsible and conscientiously, while 5.25% has never considered their behaviour. When asked about other Internet users and their level of education in correct Internet communication, 68.52% of examinees consider the others undereducated, though the majority has previously declared they mark themselves positively. This indicates examines consider themselves to be in a higher level then the rest of the Internet users, meaning they are not particularly self-critical when judging their own behaviour. Moreover, 19.02% of examinees answered they cannot mark other Internet users' behaviour, while only 12.13% of students answered they consider the others to be well trained for this sort of communication. Finally, the analysis results prove 39.34% of examines believe the Internet usage increases the impression of their responsibility. Similar percentage, 37.38% cannot decide, while 22.95% believe the Internet usage does not make them look more responsible. To conclude, the answers are relatively balanced since the examinees have probably concluded that responsibility impression depends also upon the mode of using the Internet. When analysing whether the students have prejudices towards the different and whether discrimination is a cause of their behaviour, the question about their willingness to participate in online course together with students of different races, religious beliefs, national affiliation etc., 89.84% gave a positive answer. Only 5.57% answered they wouldn't participate, while 4.26% didn't want to express their opinion.

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