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Staying human in the digital classroom

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Abstract. As of late, the entire world was seized by a plague, a virus which triggered a pandemic, leading to the transformation of our classrooms in a mere image on the screen. Education was altered overnight, shifting students to online classes, cancelling thereby all real human interaction. As teachers of ESP, we have faced a cumbersome challenge as the entire teaching- learning process had to be carried out by means of a virtual interface. The challenge springs from the fact that education is a human-based process not a technology-based one. Consequently, the balance had to be tilted back to the human element despite the fact that the focus of the digital environment in today's teaching techniques is normal. In the present paper we have attempted to highlight some of the possible ways of putting back the human part into the teaching/ learning activities and help students and teachers alike to minimize the feeling of being reduced to a simple image endowed with a robotic, distorted voice. It is obvious that we live in an increasingly digital world, and yet, there is a stringent need to stay human in the education sector as the teacher-student relationship has to rely on a truly authentic, reality-based foundation. Tailoring today's conditions to students' specific needs is the key and, in the present paper, we have aimed precisely at a concrete set of approaches meant to achieve this.

1. Shifting Boards: From Blackboard to Digital Board

Ever since the beginning of education, the teaching system in Romania has been a face-to-face process. The set of regulations in higher education institutions included a compulsory attendance percentage of 80 percent which, unless fully completed, triggered an automatic failure in the final exam. Before the pandemic, there was no possibility for students to attend classes in a different manner or profit from information and training other than by being physically present in a classroom. The pandemic period brought about an interruption of all face-to-face activities and the academic community was faced with a tremendous challenge of ensuring distance learning continuity.

The main focus of the online teaching activity has been to preserve the students' motivation and interest in studying, promote their autonomy and help them develop the knowledge and skills in order to succeed in their educational endeavor.

Starting from the beginning of the twentieth century, distance learning has come to play a key role in the evolution of university teaching practices.

The term "distance learning" applies to any type of organized training, whatever its purpose, in which most of the activities of knowledge transmission or learning are located. The entire process takes place out of the direct, face-to-face relationship between teacher and student. This type of training is thriving all over the world, and it is one of the fastest growing academic sectors. Distance learning is therefore booming nowadays in strategic university projects. Its implementation sometimes

constitutes a large part of the turnover of the training centers or institutes associated with the universities. It allows one to acquire knowledge and develop skills without having to attend an educational institution and without the physical presence of a teacher. This mode of teaching is developing today in a context that requires the use of increasingly sophisticated technical tools.

The Moodle teaching platform, widely used in the Romanian university space, is a technical device used in distance or hybrid teaching. This platform actually represents a set of technical features (tools for connection, registration, collaboration, communication, student follow-up, course design) that, are integrated and accessible from the same website (or intranet), mobilized by the various stakeholders - depending on the role played by each and every participant - to administer, design, manage or follow the training. This educational platform offers a set of features that allow device actors to exchange information and manage or consult educational content. The fundamental function of a teaching platform is to create the operating conditions of a virtual classroom, based on distance learning support for learners and the implementation of collaborative work. Nevertheless, pedagogical platforms are rather approached from the study of the uses made of them by students and less from the pedagogical added value in terms of knowledge consolidation.

The use of ICT in university pedagogy has grown exponentially. In this respect, we should recall that ICT refers to information and communication technologies structured on a set of technologies based on information technology, microelectronics, telecommunications (especially networks), multimedia and which, when combined and interconnected, make it possible to search, store, process and transmit information in the form of data of various kinds (text, sound, still images, video images, etc.)

As demonstrated by Cendra and Sullindra (2022), the use of ICT and online interactions fosters learning and develops critical thinking in students. Nevertheless, ICT integration has a positive impact on learning and meta-cognition. However, ICTs are leading to significant changes in teaching practices by transforming communication, teaching, and learning strategies for students to learn, and teachers for learning. We dare point out the fact that the integration of ICT in teaching changes teachers' practices altogether and affects their representations of learning and how they collaborate and evaluate. ICTs transform the teacher-student relationship and change the relationship to knowledge. Thus, we can argue that the integration of ICTs in the university is a complex process that generates transformations that are difficult to achieve if the actors of change are resistant to such an intervention.

Truth be told, leading an innovation in an institution like the university is a difficult task. It is even more so when it comes to well-mastered and well-established practices and functions in the daily lives of teachers and students. ICT integration is a difficult process, often a source of concern and anxiety. This concern is much more pronounced for those who are unable to use computer equipment and tools for educational purposes. As such, asking an eminent teacher to change their teaching practices is not an easy task; especially if they are satisfied with the way they structure and deliver their teaching. The dynamic of change required for the integration of ICT is a process that may be described as a very slow and gradual one, in which the whole field of teachers' conceptions of teaching, learning, knowledge, their role as teachers is being modified.

As to the role of the teacher in distance learning, it has undoubtedly highlighted the fact that ICTs are changing the way we access and disseminate knowledge. They lead teachers to think about their teaching practices and strategies. The majority of teachers involved in this research believe that the role of the teacher in distance learning is leading to a profound transformation and change. Almost all of the respondents argue that the teacher no longer only has to develop the course content and implement it in the platform, but that his activity is also oriented towards mentoring. On the other hand, they almost unanimously believe that distance learning inevitably involves an increase in workload.

ICTs generate new behaviors, new expectations, and new practices, transforming the teaching profession. Nevertheless, the use of technology in no way replaces the teacher; it can enrich and complement its role.

It is clear that the teacher is no longer the sole holder or the sole transmitter of knowledge. His role is evolving; he is led to adopt a supportive attitude at different levels: methodological support, learning follow-up, content support, discussion animation, etc. This role of “tutor” is not radically new, it already exists in the form of face-to-face training, but it is more indispensable within the distance learning process.

In distance learning, the teacher also becomes a designer of learning tasks. This design work is more time consuming than preparing for a face-to-face course.

In this context, we can divide the role of the teacher engaged in distance learning into two distinct roles: that of pedagogical designer who creates the teaching aids, the contents of the training as well as the pedagogical scenario, and that of tutor who has the responsibility to accompany the learner in his/her learning, to make him/her acquire maximum autonomy, to fight against the feeling of isolation that he/she might feel, and who interacts with the students during the training with the purpose of helping them build their knowledge and skills. To this end, the teacher-researcher must develop technical skills and learn how to use current technologies in order to be able to communicate and interact with his students.

Regarding the role of the student, it must be said that the majority of teachers agree that distance learning is based on the learner’s ability to build a personal and autonomous approach. The latter is supposed to know how to determine his/her needs and choose the means to meet them.

The transition to distance learning further forces the learner to develop critical thinking based on the learning context in order to avoid failure. He is constrained to autonomy because of his isolation and lack of face-to-face relationship with teachers. Distance learning autonomy is part of their ability to organize the content of their training according to their needs and motivations. The student is also called upon to take on certain dimensions of his/her learning, such as the organization of study schedules and pace of work.

Distance learning therefore works by appealing to the learner’s great autonomy. The virtual presence of a tutor decreases the risk of loneliness that often leads the student to drop out. Indeed, the feeling of isolation is considered to be one of the main causes of the failure of distance learning.

The results of our study pinpointed a few aspects among which students’ emphasis on the need for guidance in the appropriation of the courses implemented on the platform. In terms of their tutoring expectations, they expect an increased presence of the teacher. They want him/ her to answer all their questions, help them understand the course and guide them in their learning.

Briefly, distance learning is the set of steps taken outside of the face-to-face pedagogy between teacher and student. This is a type of teaching that complements the present teaching method and cannot replace it.

The main aim of this study has been to understand the new roles played by teachers-researchers and students who have experienced courses integrating the Moodle platform at their universities.

The results point out that all the teachers interviewed believe that the Moodle platform, which they have been able to use in distance learning, is a good tool. Some teachers believe that the platform allows them to provide students with the audio, video, and scriptural materials they need for their training. Moreover, it offers students the keys to their own training and allows them to develop great autonomy at home. The majority of teachers opt for the transmissible method in continuity with the practices adopted in attendance. Distance learning then emerges as a means of accessing content for the benefit of the student. Yet the platform also helps to establish an exchange and enhances the relationships between stakeholders. What sets this mode of teaching apart is the ability to combine both the transmission of instructional content and the interaction that allows learners to have a constant bond with teachers and peers.

While the platform facilitates some educational tasks, however, it does focus on several shortcomings. The issue of course scripting often comes up in teacher’s discourse. The majority of them say that putting courses online is a big investment of time and effort.

During the interviews carried out during classes, the students had expressed a desire to be accompanied regularly on the platform. Supervising students is the sine qua non of successful distance

learning. Being spatially isolated, students need adequate support to overcome distance and separation. To this end, the tutor is presented as “an essential guide to the proper functioning of distance learning; the tutor is a resource person with multiple skills who must show great availability” (Celik, 2008, p. 76). In the experience that this work analyzes, tutoring is marginalized in the training device put in place. Indeed, when asked about this, the majority of students emphasized the lack of guidance that could have helped them in better understanding their course and completing their work.

In this mode of teaching, ICTs are both teaching and learning tools. They are used by both the learner and the teacher. The benefit of integrating them into teaching practices is to improve learning and to address academic failure. To do this, the teacher should develop a set of skills that are essential to this type of teaching. To facilitate the integration of ICT into the teacher’s teaching activities, training is needed. Analysis of the data collected shows that most of the teachers surveyed feel that their ICT skills remain below the required level. This leads to reluctance on the part of teachers, who show little involvement in the process of ICT integration, as their basic training does not include integration of ICT for education. Thus, the development of technological and transverse skills plays a crucial role in the successful integration of ICT.

Therefore, whereas distance learning gives students some freedom in managing and developing their learning through collaborative work and interaction, it also requires great autonomy. In order to successfully complete distance learning, students must devote the necessary time to their studies and organize their learning process, and must also raise awareness and implication into the educational process.

2. Conclusion

In short, it can be deduced from the research we carried out that Romanian distance learning experience is in its infancy and deserves to be developed and improved to better meet the needs and expectations of both teachers and students. This mode of teaching, which will now accompany the traditional mode of teaching in our universities, is characterized by very specific pedagogical principles that are not limited to the reproduction of the face-to-face class.

In conclusion, the results of this study have raised new questions that pave the way for new avenues in distance learning pedagogical engineering. We can state that there has been an awareness at all levels (individual, collective, institutional) of the role of distance learning likely to reshape the fundamental dimensions of the educational process such as the place of teachers, students, but also of the focus on their training in a digital culture and distance learning era.

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