MOTIVATION AS AN IMPORTANT ASPECT OF EFFECTIVE VIRTUAL TEAMWORK

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Abstract
The learning process supported by ICT is the very matter of fact nowadays. One of the effective forms of e-learning work methods seems to be virtual teamwork. In fact, the opportunity to communicate together, the large space for co-operation and the possibility to increase the ability to co-operate effectively in the cyberspace makes the virtual teamwork attractive and popular. On the other hand certain problems still exist in the virtual teamwork process. One of the frequent problems identified by our long term qualitative research implemented in the courses based on virtual teamwork is the lack of motivation. The paper focuses on the aspect of motivation and analyzes the innovative steps and efforts made to increase motivation.

Keywords: e-learning, virtual teamwork, motivation, communication, innovation

INTRODUCTION

Motivation as a key factor of effective e-learning
“Motivation is not only important because it is a necessary causal factor of learning, but because it mediates learning and is a consequence of learning as well” (Wlodkowski, 1985, p. 4).
The requirement of strong positive motivation is an important factor guaranteeing success of the education process at the most general level. In the field of e-learning this premise is even more valid.
If we concentrate on e-learning online represented here by virtual teamwork we can conclude that in spite of the progressivity of this form of learning the use of ICT in the process of learning does not often live up to the expectations.

Although the use of ICT brings a lot of advantages including time and space flexibility, broad access to data, sharing knowledge and exchanging experience. These advantages are often not fully and effectively used.

One of the most important factors is then no doubt the motivation to participate in e-learning courses, to take an active part in completing the assigned tasks and to effectively use all the available applications and tools that make it possible for the students to take part in the course and that often also make the work in the course easier. E-learning has the potential to open up a number of different opportunities for vast numbers of learners across the globe. Without the proper motivation for students to engage in the learning experience, however, these e-learning initiatives will be unsuccessful. (Smith R, 2008)
However, the importance of positive motivation is not always fully appreciated. Many e-learning practices don’t care about learner’s motivation. (Blanchard E. Frasson C., 2004) Some actual e-learning practices produce negative emotions on learners (frustration, fear, shame, anxiety and embarrassment) more frequently than positive ones (excitation, pride). (O’Regan, K. 2003).

Many educators and organizers of e-learning courses still consider e-learning to be either only a displacement of traditional teaching in an electronic environment or the support of typical way of educating by ICT. The lack of invention and of the interest in innovating the standard didactic approaches and techniques of pedagogic work can further manifest itself negatively in the attempts to use e-learning without the sufficient knowledge of how to work with various applications.

Social communication is an important aspect of any process of education. It includes not only written language but also the chance to actively participate in the process of learning, to communicate with other students and
teachers, to pass on and exchange knowledge etc.. Informal communication has an important place in the process of education as well.

In spite of the fact that social interaction among students in e-learning courses is of great importance since it is a condition of both completing the assigned tasks and sharing and exchanging opinions, remarks, objections and new ideas, many e-learning courses remain static without any distinct opportunities of multilateral communication among the students or among the students and the teachers or tutors.

Students then often remain completely alone in the virtual environment only with an instruction video or text. Such courses only cause disillusion and decrease the effectiveness of the process. The advantages described in literature including for example geographic diversity, time independence, support by ICT etc. can under specific circumstances become a factor decreasing the required positive motivation to take part in such courses. There is often a lack of the ability to reach an agreement on suitable times of virtual meetings. The ability to listen to and understand different meanings of certain issues under discussion can also be developed insufficiently as well as the skills of working with the ICT.

A Course based on Blended learning

The sociology course has been taught at the University of Economics in Prague since the beginning of the development of e-learning i.e. since the end of the 1990’s. Now an upgraded version of the course based on the conception of blended learning is being taught. This form was chosen mainly on the basis of the need to increase the positive motivation to take part in e-learning courses as well as because of the intention to stress the advantages of using ICT in learning. The course is offered in a combined form comprised of lectures that the students have to attend in person and of seminars based on the principle of virtual team work. When this form of the course was being designed the main goal was to gradually show to the students the progressive nature of e-learning with special attention paid to virtual team work.

Students then have a chance to meet face to face during the lectures as well as to engage in distant cooperation as members of virtual teams during the seminars.

However, the test run of the course did not bring the expected results. The analysis of the first run of the course showed a relatively low frequency of chatting, sporadic use of team bulletin boards and clumsiness in editing wiki which is the tool for creating a joint document. It was apparent that students usually agreed on how to complete the assigned tasks during the lectures supplementing team work by completing the intermediate tasks individually. Virtual teamwork was then used only marginally especially when it was necessary to connect all the parts and form the final project.

The feedback i.e. the evaluation of the work in the course by the students pointed out the extraordinariness of this form of work and therefore also relatively low experience with this type of cooperation and with using the tools of e-communication. One of the biggest deficiencies proved to be the lack of skill in creating a cooperative document.

There were also negative remarks to the design and orientation in the course even though it is placed in an often used CMS that is available as freeware.

On the other hand even at the beginning there was an apparent interest in courses of this type and also in helping to improve the offer of courses.

FINDINGS

Comparative analysis

A comparative analysis of the work of students in the years 2008 to 2012 uncovered significant improvements in the activity of students in completing the assigned tasks and also in the character of virtual team work. During that time 274 students participated in this course. Frequencies of active entrances into the course and of the use of the tools of communication were compared. The comparison of the frequencies of active entrances into the course showed a rising trend. The frequency of chatting proved to be rising as well. As
mentioned above feedback is one of the parts of the course which means that the last tasks the students have to complete is answering broad questions concerning the evaluation of the work in the course, inside the teams and also among the teams. Students can also comment on the quality and the possibility of communication, the most frequent difficulties as well as any other shortcomings. New ideas and remarks of students concerning any possible innovations and upgrades of the course are highly valued. The answers supplied by the students of the course are the basis of a long term qualitative research of feedback. The comparative analysis uncovered differences in students' answers as well, a positive trend mainly in the areas of interest, activity and motivation was detected.

Based on the remarks and ideas supplied by the students of the course a space for questions concerning the technical and organizational aspects of the seminar was added to the lectures. It allows the students to understand better how the individual communication tools work, how they should be used, etc..

Work in the seminars is logically interconnected with the topics of the lectures in such a way that students gradually acquire enough information to realize the actual teamwork and to complete the assigned tasks. The fact that the knowledge and the skills acquired in the course can be used practically is a very important factor that strengthens the motivation of the students.

The analysis and comparison of the answers from the years 2008 to 2012 also pointed out the rising importance of active team cooperation. Although at first the level of teamwork was very low and the team cooperation itself was relatively ineffective, during the following years the importance and quality of team work was valued quite highly. Also the way of distributing responsibilities in the individual teams and assigning intermediate tasks to the individual members of the teams improved qualitatively and moved towards the optimization of the realized steps.

During the lectures special attention is paid to the essence of communication as one of the basic forms of social interaction and a key characteristics of a human being as a social being in order to boost the motivation of the students.

To publicly present their final project the students have to prepare a presentation using an application that also requires active and productive virtual cooperation. The students appreciate mainly the chance to work in an interesting environment that supports imagination and creativity. They also point out the difficulty of participating in the creation of a joint product but evaluate positively the chance to acquire and broaden the skills necessary to prepare a presentation in a stimulating environment.

Posting and adding study materials to the topics that are dealt with in the course is also evaluated very positively. Student welcome not only the study materials but also links to actualities, videos and other sources of data that help them form a complex picture of the studied issues.

The ongoing supply of news and new information is described as a stimulating fun, important inspiration, discovering unknown worlds etc.. The positive reaction is also highlighted by the fact that even students themselves participate in supplying actualities and relevant sources of data.

According to the students who passed the course one of the most valuable characteristics of the course is its "liveliness". This liveliness is going to be developed intentionally in the future. For the time being we are planning online meetings with experts during discussion meetings dealing with concrete issues. The positive reactions of the participants also influence positively the overall awareness of the course, its "good record" and they increase the interest of other students in enrolling in this course.

CONCLUSIONS

It is a well known fact that learning is a process that helps human beings to adjust themselves to the changing life conditions. In the time of enormous development of ICT and of their use not only in education but also in other areas of social life both the teacher and the student have to meet a very important requirement of using
the possibilities offered by ICT as effectively as possible. The issues of positive motivation, of strengthening the interest, activity and desire to learn and acquiring new ideas and skills etc. therefore still remain the key factors leading to successful learning and to the success of the process of education itself as it was in previous eras of the development of human civilization. Even J. A. Komenský already talked about didactics as an art of teaching and he pointed out the necessity of making education more interesting.

As is becoming more and more apparent it is necessary to find an acceptable way of making the process of education more interesting. E-learning can also be more exciting, fun, and entertaining than self-directed learning (McCormac & Jones, 1998; Rosenberg, 2001; Collis & Meeuwsen, 1999).

WJEIS’s Note: This article was presented at 4th International Conference on New Trends in Education and Their Implications - ICONTE, 25-27 April, 2013, Antalya-Turkey and was selected for publication for Volume 3 Number 2 of IJONTE 2013 by WJEIS Scientific Committee

REFERENCES


