Chapter 19
A Skype–Buddy Model for Blended Learning

Carmen E. Macharaschwili
Indiana University – Bloomington, USA

Linda Skidmore Coggin
Indiana University – Bloomington, USA

ABSTRACT

Universities are challenged with providing quality educational experiences that meet students' needs for engagement and collaboration. The availability of computer-mediated communication tools provides opportunities for such needs to be met as well as allows students the opportunity to complete higher education degree requirements in virtual environments This chapter discusses how Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) was used in a unique Skype-Buddy system to provide virtual face-to-face participation in traditional doctoral classrooms. Students' and professors' satisfaction, benefits, challenges, and surprises in this system are examined. Results and recommendations from this study are applicable in undergraduate and secondary level classrooms.

INTRODUCTION

Online learning is common in higher education allowing students to complete degree requirements in virtual environments. Faced with the challenge of providing quality education experiences for these students, some educators have implemented blended learning as an alternative to learning solely online. Garrison and Kanuka (2004) define blended learning as " the thoughtful integration of classroom face-to-face learning experiences with online learning experiences" (p.96). There are many forms of blended learning that include the combination of face-to face (traditional classroom environment) and asynchronous environments (text based, Internet environment). In this project we propose a new concept of blended learning--that of virtual face-to-face with the use of Skype technology in the classroom.

Skype is a form of VoIP/video (Voice Over Internet Protocol with video) software that allows for video and voice calls to be made over the internet. In addition to voice and video functions, Skype also has a synchronous chat function. This form of software simulates the face-to-face environment of a traditional

classroom while still allowing a student to participate at a distance. The use of Skype in the classroom is a very popular trend, in fact, Skype has developed its own website: Skype in the Classroom on which teachers worldwide can post ideas for Skype lessons, connect with other classrooms and come up with ways to collaborate via Skype. Skype in the Classroom's global community boasts more than 43,000 teachers and 2,400 lessons (Waxman, 2012).

Though various forms of this type of environment have been used, for different purposes, this study is unique in the method of applying a "Skype-Buddy" model. The distance student (online) is paired with a proxy student (in the traditional face-to-face classroom) who is responsible for adjusting the camera, volume and computer to allow for full participation by the distance student. (Details can be found in the Skype-Buddy Protocol section at the end of this chapter). In this project the researchers participated in a Skype-Buddy model in two doctoral seminars and examined the experiences related to the satisfaction, benefits, challenges, and surprises of each of the participants.

The main research questions are:

1. How does using Skype in a blended learning environment shape participants' (distance student and proxy student) engagement in the (online and traditional) classroom?
2. What are the satisfactions, benefits, challenges, and surprises for other students and instructors in a traditional classroom when Skype is used to include a distance student in full class and small group work in the classroom?

Background

A good deal of research has been done on distance education in general. Roblyer and Wiencke (2004) found that the degree of interaction among participants in distance education classes contributes to both student achievement and satisfaction. This research builds upon this finding. Specifically, a virtual version of blended learning was examined as a means to increase interaction among the distance learner, professor, and classmates.

Garrison & Cleveland-Innes (2005) examined the effect of interaction and its impact on student satisfaction and found that interaction needs to be structured and systematic for online education. In addition, in order to create a community of inquiry where interaction is meaningful and sustained and ideas are shared, this community must include various forms of interaction to include interaction among content, instructors and students. The various forms of interaction included in this blended learning study include the use of Skype video conferencing, Skype chat function, online asynchronous environment in the use of online course environment, phone calls and face-to-face conversations among the students, professor and other classmates.

Few studies reported the use of VoIP to allow virtual participation in a traditional classroom. Samsonov (2010) conducted a pilot study with three homebound students to determine if Skype technology could be effectively used to allow active participation in the traditional classroom. Skype was used successfully to provide access to the classroom. However, there was an issue with the homebound student's motivation to use the technology and participate during class time.

Another study reported by Newman (2007) looked at the use of VoIP technology to add synchronous voice communication to an online course in response. This innovation was incorporated in the course as many students of online courses in the study indicated their dissatisfied with lack of personal interaction with the instructor. Students in the course were presented with instructional material for use of Skype

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