

# Chapter 11

## The Importance of Social Components in Online Learning: The Case of Business Administration Online at MCI

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### ABSTRACT

*Since the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic, tertiary education has been mainly pursued through online teaching. This form of teaching is also associated with challenges regarding the social presence of both lecturers and the students during classes. In this context, understanding how to effectively enforce social interaction and trust in the virtual classroom is of high importance. This chapter presents various examples of social learning pursued by the Management Center Innsbruck in their blended learning degree programs. Many of these have already been established in 2014 when the first blended learning degree programs started. However, the need for physical distancing made clear that social presence and interaction are of even greater relevance than ever before. Increasing the sense of cohesion and being a proper member of a study group can also be supported by more informal interactions.*

### INTRODUCTION

The Management Center Innsbruck (MCI) | The Entrepreneurial School®, as a pioneer in Austrian tertiary online education, started with blended learning programs combining online and face-to-face teaching

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-8239-8.ch011

in 2014 due to the increased demand of students to study while working. The faculty at MCI has thus acquired expertise in teaching online already well before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the switch to fully online teaching. For this chapter, the authors will focus on experiences from the very first blended learning program implemented at MCI, the undergraduate program Business Administration Online. This degree program is offered both in German and in English and thus can also shed light on specific requirements when teaching online in a setting with many international students in contrast to an environment where most students come from German speaking regions only.

The MCI has established high standards to assure and maintain a high level of quality of the online teaching formats: For instance, every faculty member must complete a mandatory online teaching training before starting their online teaching. This ensures that lecturers are aware of the specific needs regarding social interaction in online settings and to be well prepared for the didactical challenges stemming from distance learning. In addition to continuously improve the quality in online teaching, MCI regularly offers further training for online teaching for advanced topics of online teaching, such as tools to increase interaction among students during class and to establish also social presence in online teaching. Moreover, four teaching assistants at the department act as quality managers and instructional designers, providing informal support for all lecturers to help improve the instructional design of every single online course in the curriculum, the use of software for teaching, smart grading practices, and tips for quick and effective feedback for students.

Altogether, faculty members at MCI were thus already trained well in teaching in an online environment before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. As an instantaneous response to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic on teaching classes in a high-quality manner, further asynchronous training modules were designed and implemented by the learning solutions department, a unit that supports (online) teaching at MCI, immediately after the first lockdown in March 2020. Since then, these additional training possibilities have facilitated the switch to full online teaching for all lecturers and have ensured the active participation of students in online formats and to raise awareness for the various social components in online teaching.

## **BACKGROUND**

In this chapter, the authors focus on the degree program Business Administration Online, which is tailored for students who are looking to combine studying a high-quality program and working in their jobs. The degree program takes 6 terms and requires passing courses valuing 180 ECTS points. The program is facilitated in a blended learning format comprising both synchronous and asynchronous aspects. The synchronous lectures consist of six live webinars and one full day residency in the middle of the course. The asynchronous aspect is flexible online study time and thus ideal for working students. The weekly workload for students amounts to 20-25 hours in total. This weekly workload is divided into 70 per cent for asynchronous study time, 20 per cent for live webinars and ten per cent for the one-day residency per course<sup>1</sup>.

On average, Business Administration Online students are 29 years at the start of their studies and can look back on a profound professional experience in business and management or beyond. The majority of the students chose the blended learning format due to work reasons, however, some decided on this format due to other motives, such as a career as a professional athlete, or family commitments. Even though the blended learning program requires only up to 10 days per term in Innsbruck, most students

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