

Chapter 77

Characterizing Online Learners' Time Regulation: Comparative Case Studies of Virtual Campuses in France and Spain

Margarida Romero

Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, Spain & Université Laval, Canada

Christophe Gentil

Campus Virtuel de l'Université de Limoges, France

ABSTRACT

The importance of the time factor in online learning is starting to be recognized as one of the main factors in the learners' achievements and drop outs (Barbera, Gros, & Kirshner, 2012; Park & Choi, 2009; Romero, 2010). Despite the recognition of the time factor importance, there is still the need for theorizing temporality in the context of online education. In this chapter, the authors contribute to the advancement of the evaluation of time factors in online learning by adapting the theoretical framework of the Academic Learning Times (Caldwell, Huitt, & Graeber, 1982; Berliner, 1984) for evaluating the online learners' time regulation. For this purpose, they compare two case studies based on the Academic Learning Times framework. The case studies characterize online learner regulation based on an analysis of online learners at the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC), Spain, and the initiatives taken by the instructional team of the Virtual Campus at the University of Limoges (CVTIC) to support online learner time regulation on this virtual campus in France. After comparing the two case studies, the chapter provides guidelines for improving online learners' individual and collaborative time regulation and reflects about the need to advance in the theorization of the time factor frameworks in online education.

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1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter aims to contribute to the analysis of online learner time regulation in the context of virtual campuses in Europe. Time regulation skills in the context of the time factor in e-learning are presented and a review of the literature in the field is made. Following conceptualization of the concepts and a description of the challenges of time regulation for online learners, two case studies are analyzed, in order to identify online learner time regulation based on critical incidents and experiences on two European virtual campuses. The case studies characterize online learner regulation based on an analysis of online learners at the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC), in Spain, and the initiatives taken by the instructional team of the Virtual Campus at the University of Limoges (CVTIC) to support online learner time regulation on this virtual campus in France. The two case studies are compared based on the Academic Learning Times framework at the end of this chapter, in order to provide guidelines for improving online learners' individual and collaborative time regulation.

2. TIME FLEXIBILITY AND REGULATION IN ONLINE LEARNING

Distance education is continuing to progress worldwide. In the context of higher education, the traditional face-to-face universities have embraced blended learning and online distance learning courses. Other universities have been created from scratch as online distance virtual campuses (Open University UK, Universitat Oberta de Catalunya...). The increase of the distance and blended learning programs has allowed adult learners with distance and temporal constraints to enroll in Higher Education. Online distance education overcomes distance and time, providing the higher degree of flexibility required by the adult lifelong learner. For these students, time is a scarce resource that must be properly managed, in order to achieve a Work Life Learning Balance (WLLB). The challenge of WLLB is to be able to spend enough time in each sphere of the adult learner's life, attending to his or her professional, social, family and lifelong learning requirements. However, finding an appropriate balance between different life domains is neither easy nor instantaneous (Metzger & Cléach, 2004). Solving the WLLB equation can be a challenge when professional and family times are fixed or need to be socially synchronized with office or factory hours (professional sphere) and school and children's habits (family sphere). Distance learners' use of time leads them to define temporal patterns among their various activities in which learning times are often limited by professional and family constraints (Demeure, Romero, & Lambropoulos, 2010; Carreras & Valax, 2010). To balance their various compulsory activities and the high level of temporal flexibility offered in the virtual campus, distance learners should develop their time management competency and be able to regulate their learning times in their individual and collective tasks.

Temporal flexibility is defined by Akar, Clifton, & Doherty (2012, p. 1194) as "the possibility of an activity to be performed at a different time". According to Cesta, Oddi, & Susi (2000, p. 143) temporal flexibility is "a measure of how the [start and / or finish] time points can be moved with respect to each other without generating temporal inconsistency". In this respect, the virtual campus allows the students, at a macro level, to start a higher university degree at a particular moment, but in most cases it offers the possibility of completing the courses or units of the program at different paces; at a micro level, online learners are not required to take lessons at a specific time, but they have the flexibility to decide the time-on-task they want (or can have) in the lessons offered within a certain time slot. Time flexibility appears to be the key for the time poor students who have professional, family or social temporal constraints, and

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