

Chapter 21

Enhancing Students’ Online Experiences: Best Educational Practices Unveiled by the Mouse in the Presence of a Cat

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ABSTRACT

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many educational institutions offering mainly face-to-face courses were forced to switch to online ones. This chapter presents a compilation of good practices adopted during the synchronous online lessons carried out via Skype for Business in two undergraduate courses at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. The results of the summative evaluation, obtained through questionnaires at the end of the semester, as well as through formative evaluation throughout the semester, support that using the proper communication and collaborative tools, increasing interaction, immediacy, and intimacy with the instructor, and developing an atmosphere of respect, trust, and collaboration, could immerse students in an interactive synchronous online experience and help them develop a positive attitude towards online learning. An exceptional issue, pointed out by most of the students, was the online presence of “Carrot,” the instructor’s cat, that enhanced student-teacher and student-student immediacy and intimacy.

INTRODUCTION

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many educational institutions offering mainly face-to-face courses were forced to switch to online ones. Both instructors and students were faced with a new reality, for which, in several cases, they had not been properly prepared. The Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (AUTH), being one of the largest universities in Greece, had been previously using e-learning, a customized asynchronous platform where instructors can upload announcements and educational material,

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and/or conduct quizzes or create fora and wikis. It is also used as a platform for students to submit their individual and group assignments. During the first semester of 2020 and after only three class-based sessions that required physical presence had been delivered, all sessions were moved online because of the lockdown brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Skype for Business (SfB) and Zoom, among other platforms for synchronous learning, were immediately made accessible to the instructors by the university.

This chapter sets out to present a compilation of good practices used during the synchronous learning periods in two undergraduate courses in AUTh, carried out via Skype for Business. In the first section of the chapter, the theoretical background of the instructional design of these synchronous online lessons is presented, focusing mainly on the importance of promoting a variety of interaction types in the online sessions, as well as the immediacy between instructor and students and her social presence through the use of proper communication and collaborative tools. In the second section of the chapter, students' views are presented in relation to their experience during the semester's online lessons, as obtained through questionnaires handed out as part of the summative evaluation occurring at the end of the semester, as well as through formative evaluation, occurring throughout the semester.

THEORETICAL CONTEXT

Designing Online Courses

Most e-learning design approaches converge on the idea that participant interaction and collaboration, developing a learning community, and student-teacher immediacy and intimacy are important elements for an effective online lesson. Based on these approaches and considering that individual characteristics of students should be taken into account, given that the latter do not constitute a single and homogeneous group (Twigg, 2003; Pavlis Korres & Lefteriotou, 2020), an attempt was made to include and utilize multimedia in the teaching design of online courses, as well as a variety of communication and collaborative tools, in order to motivate all students and promote their interaction with the content, the instructor and their peers (Moore, 1989, 2007; Thurmond & Wambach, 2004; Guy, 2007; Kang & Imt, 2013; Mutalib, Halim, & Yahaya, 2016; Pavlis Korres & Leftheriotou, 2016; Tawfik et al., 2018; Oyarzun, Stefaniak, Bol, & Morrison, 2018). To promote interaction with peers and instructors as well as collaboration skills, which are considered critical elements influencing learning experiences within online courses (Park & Bonk, 2007a), we tried to select and make use of the proper collaborative and communication tools available on the platform, aligning them with the corresponding educational goals (Pavlis Korres, 2012). The educational practices further intended to increase social presence, immediacy and intimacy between instructor and students (Mehrabian, 1967, 1971; LaRose & Whitten, 2000; Rovai, 2002; Salmon, 2004; Pallof & Pratt, 2005; Finkelstein, 2006; Hrastinski, 2008; Schutt, Allen, & Laumakis, 2009; Garsisson, 2011). The creation of favorable conditions for students' emotional connection and social interaction (Kim, Liu, & Bonk, 2005; Park & Bonk, 2007b) proved to be particularly challenging and the same holds for creating an enabling environment for the increase of student satisfaction, since, according to the literature, as learner satisfaction increases, the learning outcome improves (Driver, 2002; Hong, 2002; Allen et al., 2006; Schutt et al., 2009; Claus & Changchit, 2017).

In view of the fact that, for the vast majority of students, this was their first contact with online courses, one of the objectives of the course was for the educational experience to have a positive effect in terms

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