

Communication Between Learners and Instructors in an Online Learning Environment During the COVID–19 Pandemic: Preservice Teachers' Online Communication Experiences

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

With the COVID-19 pandemic, emergency remote teaching practices have come into play all over the world, and what can be done about effective online learning and teaching has become one of the important challenges for instructors. Online communication is an important factor for having a sense of belonging to the learning community, learner satisfaction, engagement, motivation, and learning outcomes. Therefore, this study aimed to examine the communication experiences between learners and instructors in online learning environments. Qualitative data collected from preservice teachers enrolled in teacher preparation programs during the 2020-2021 academic year. Data provided participants' insights about positive and negative communication experiences. Instructors' communication skills including active listening, empathy, and nonverbal communication skills, as well as efficient pedagogical approaches, are important factors for positive communication experiences.

INTRODUCTION

With the Covid 19 pandemic, many schools, universities, and educational institutions have closed their doors indefinitely, and approximately one and a half billion students from all age groups around the world have switched from face-to-face education to distance education activities (UNESCO, 2020; UNICEF, 2020). In Spring 2020, many educators made this transition by using video-conferencing tools where they would essentially replicate face-to-face pedagogy in virtual online classrooms (Lang, 2020). During this time, many higher education institutions made distance education programs and software (video-conferencing software, digital tools, etc.) that were not available before, ready for use by both learners and instructors (Miller, Sellnow & Strawser, 2021). However, how to design effective online teaching and learning experiences was not clear for most instructors.

On the other hand, with the long-lasting pandemic and the vaccine that emerged in this period, higher education institutions started to deliver new teaching formats such as hybrid and hyflex in which both face-to-face and online education are used together (Miller, Sellnow & Strawser, 2021). Also, designing effective teaching and learning experiences for these mixed-method delivery systems are still not clear. Creating efficient online learning experiences is very important for both student satisfaction and fulfilling learning outcomes. Further, online communication has a positive effect on student engagement, motivation, and learning outcomes (Fiock, 2020).

Communication in Online Learning Environments

Commonly, communication can be expressed as the creation of meaningful messages sent or received from person to person or between individuals or the community (Vlachopoulos & Makri, 2019). People exchange messages with each other in line with various goals and objectives. Some researchers define communication as an interactive activity influenced by many factors. Actually, effective communication must be interactive, which means that individuals listen and respond to each other because of individuals' different purposes, backgrounds and preferences (Vlachopoulos & Makri, 2019). Holmberg (1995) Communication in education is often associated with interaction. Considering distance education literature, theories of interaction and communication are classified within distance education theories (Simonson, Schlosser & Hanson, 1999)

Effective communication is important for online courses. The importance of online communication has been widely supported in the literature. (Ferguson 2010; Abrami et al. 2011; Martin et al. 2012; Ting & Gonzalez 2013; Kuo et al. 2014; Moore 2014; Kyei-Blankson et al. 2016). Effective communication and interaction inevitably include a better relationship between students, higher course retention, achievement of learning goals, overall academic performance, and course satisfaction (Cicco, 2019). The success of online learning has been associated with advanced communication through information technologies.

Borje Holmberg (1989) developed his theory of communication between instructors and learners in distance education called "guided didactic conversation". It encourages educators to empathize with students and thus become the biggest supporters of learners' own learning. Holmberg stated that his theory has explanatory value in associating teaching effectiveness with real time exchange of questions, answers and arguments in communication, as well as the impact of feelings of belonging and cooperation (Simonson, Schlosser & Hanson, 1999). He put forward seven assumptions, which he stated as the teaching principles of distance education:

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