ABSTRACT

The objective of this article is to evaluate the virtual learning environment managed by the Deanery of Science and Technology of the Centroccidental Lisandro Alvarado University, under a communication perspective. The investigation focuses on communication in the Distance Education point-of-view, and on the indication of strategies that encourage participation. Information and communication technologies might cause new terms to be inserted or excluded from vocabularies and may affect the correct use of language and quality of contents. Through the combination of mixed methods, with emphasis in qualitative methodology tools (interviews, focal group and questionnaires), the content of 53 programs was revised. A total of 20 programs were considered interactive, 26 used as information repositories, and 7 were inactive. We aimed to contribute with teachers and students, but also to encourage reflection among all the actors involved in the process.

As bad practice indicators, the following could be highlighted: misusage of upper-and lower-case letters, empty interactive sections (which does not favor motivation); missing author references or indication of sources, and students’ questions remaining unanswered due to lacking feedback. Good practices have also been observed, such as courses with clear instructions and proper indications are given to students.

Keywords: distance education; quality; communication; technology.

RESUMEN

El objetivo es evaluar comunicacionalmente entornos virtuales de aprendizaje del Decanato de Ciencias y Tecnología de la Universidad Centroccidental “Lisandro Alvarado”. Se trata de una aproximación de la comunicación de la Educación a Distancia y determinar las estrategias que incentivan la participación. La intervención de las tecnologías de la información y la comunicación

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podrían generar el uso o desuso de nuevos términos, pero también afectar el correcto uso del lenguaje y la calidad de los contenidos. Mediante la combinación de métodos mixtos, conén fasisen las herramientas de la metodología cualitativa, (entrevistas, grupo focal y encuestas), se revisa el contenido de 53 cursos, de estos, sólo 20 presentan interactividad, 26 son utilizados como repositorios de información y 07 está inactivos. Se busca brindar un aporte para docentes y aprendices, así como la reflexión de todos los actores involucrados. Entre las malas prácticas destaca: mal uso de mayúsculas y minúsculas; secciones de interactividad vacías que podrían desalentar la participación; materiales sin referenciar la autoría o sin indicar la fuente y, ausencia de retroalimentación ante las interrogantes de los estudiantes. Hay buenas prácticas en cursos en los que la sin estruccionesson claras y donde se elabora una adecuada inducciónal estudiante.

Palabras-clave: educación a distancia; calidad; comunicación; tecnología.

RESUMO

O objetivo do artigo é avaliar o ambiente virtual da aprendizagem do Decanato de Ciências e Tecnologia da Universidade do Centro-oeste “Lizandro Alvarado” (Venezuela) do ponto de vista da comunicação. Trata-se de uma abordagem do ponto de vista da comunicação na Educação à Distância e a indicação de estratégias que incentivam a participação. As intervenções das tecnologias da informática e da comunicação poderiam gerar o uso ou desuso de novos termos, porém, podem também afetar o correto uso da linguagem e a qualidade dos conteúdos. Através da combinação de métodos mistos, com ênfase nas ferramentas da metodologia qualitativa (entrevistas, grupo focal e questionários), revisou-se o conteúdo de 53 cursos. Desses, somente 20 apresentam interatividade, 26 são utilizados como repositórios de informação e 7 estão inativos. Visa-se oferecer um aporte para docentes e aprendizes, mas, também, a reflexão de todos os atores envolvidos. Destaca-se entre a má práxis: o mal uso de maiúsculas e minúsculas; seções de interatividade vazias, o que poderia desmotivar a participação; matérias sem referência da autoria ou sem indicar a fonte e a ausência de retorno diante das perguntas dos estudantes. Existem boas práticas como cursos onde as instruções são claras e elabora-se uma adequada indução ao estudante.

Palavras-chave: educação a distância; qualidade; comunicação; tecnologia.

INTRODUCTION

The main purpose of this research is to evaluate the communication present in the Virtual Learning Environment (VLA3) used by the Distance Education (D.E.) system of the Science and Technology Department at the Centroccidental Lisandro Alvarado University (UCLA), located in the Venezuelan city of Barquisimeto, Lara state. In addition, this study aims towards determining the communication strategies for encouraging the participation of students. Such strategies are used by teachers, assistants and tutors of the semi-traditional model, developed under the UCLA’s Distance Education System (Seducla4).

3 TL: Acronym in English for original in Spanish EVA – Entorno Virtual de Aprendizaje
4 TN: Original acronym in Spanish.
The research is aligned with the constant concern to make proper use of communication, considering that the intervention of information and communication technology (ICT) generally leads to the insertion or exclusion of terms from vocabulary, and it may also affect the correct use of language, negatively influencing the quality of contents shared under the D.E. model.

**Quality, communication and education: a close link**

In 2005, the Virtual Center for the Development of Quality Patterns in Distance, Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean, along with the Private Technical University of Loja, and with the objective of promoting the launching, improvement and successful management of D.E. programs based on information technology among higher education providers, have together highlighted a list of quality criteria:

a) Facilitating Processes (leadership and management style; policies and strategy, human development; resources and alliances; recipients and educational processes)

b) Results (related to recipients; educational processes, people, society, global).

It must be noted that communication plays a determinant role for successfully evaluating, verifying, or analyzing quality according to such criteria. Thus, quality criteria in the semi-traditional model is closely linked to the communicative issue.

According to Monterola (2011), one of the roles attributed to Higher Education is the need to provide qualified training – to become capable professionals and responsible citizens – who must face the globalized world. This attribution is impossible to accomplish without a high-quality faculty staff.

Peré (2004) highlights that both communication and education have developed parallel theories that are closely related. According to the author, it is impossible to consider education and not contemplate communication, because when there is an educational relationship, so is established a communicational one.

On the other hand, Palacios (2006) considers that communication in D.E. may be understood as exercises in human being’s quality; leisure; expression; interaction; affirmation of the being; openness to the world; feeling yourself and others and take ownership of oneself. The author warns that the combination of pedagogy, communication, technology and administration represents D.E.’s real challenge, which has not been approached in an integral, systemic and modular fashion.

Santos and Oliveira (2011) argue that among the common strategies to encourage interaction are greetings, emoticons, compliments, questions, suggestions, recommendations and evaluations. According to the authors, the use of strategies of affection nature is vital to assure students’ participation in environments where written communication replaces face-to-face interaction.

Clementino (2011) mentions that among the motivational factors mentioned by D.E. students, special highlight was given to feedback and personalized attention from teacher or tutor, which they believe to be
differentials that humanize the teaching-learning process. Thus, the tripod—interaction, feedback, personalized attention—allows for the establishment or fomentation of personal relationships among participants of the virtual model.

**METHODOLOGY**

A combination of mixed methods is used in the research, with particular focus on the qualitative methodology. Casas (2008) warns of potential limitations, advantages and disadvantages of each methodology.

Questionnaires were the technique of choice, which were applied to Seducla’s representatives, focal group for consultation with teachers working in programs of semi-traditional models, platform revisions and questionnaires to students. Two were the tools for collecting information, as detailed below:

a) One pilot questionnaire, electronically distributed, applied to D.E students of Virtual Learning Environments (VLE) selected for the study.

b) Once the results from the pilot instrument were sorted and analyzed, they were presented to the facilitators or faculty specialists, gathered as a focal group with the objective of considering the recommendations drafted by them, correcting it and then reapplying the finalized version on-site, directly to the students of the selected VLEs.

**RESULTS**

**Main findings at the VLEs**

Currently, there are a total of 53 programs registered on the platform (http://sed.ucla.edu.ve). Only 20 of them are interactive (i.e. maintain communication among participants); 26 programs are exclusively used as subjects’ information repository and 7 are unfinished or inactive. In regards to the courses offered on the website http://sed.ucla.edu.ve/ced, there are a total of 52. However, the majority is under construction and only 10 offer some interactivity in periods different than the ones covered by the study.

The misuse of lower- and upper-case letters is evident, as well as mistakes in gender, singular/plural forms and empty interactive sections. In addition, references to authors and sources are missing from the material. There is poor wording and overuse of uppercase on the instructions given to students, as well as incorrect use of graphic accents.

Many students—and some teachers, despite the faculty’s clear request for a full profile—do not upload their face pictures. Similarly, feedback on proposed activities is not evident, at least not on the platform. Students’ assignments are delivered with punctuation mistakes and failure to comply with guidelines is evident.

Some of the programs present clear instructions, adequately developed commands and presentation dynamics, motivating the students’ participation. Expectations towards the subject are explored; the content and evaluation plans are presented. In some cases, values like responsibility, honesty,
cooperation and tolerance and emphasized. In other cases, norms band basic rules of the center and computer laboratory are laid out.

The use of tools like Slideshare (for presentations), FLV Player (for videos) or ISpring (for presentations with animation) with the purpose of making content more dynamic and attractive has been observed. Forums are also used to encourage participation, with instructions that invite moderators to guide the discussion of themes they introduce.

There is contribution from students providing a collaborative environment; e.g. when they recommend useful software for the program and provide computer access and application download time. Similarly, there is potential for students to help each other with their own questions regarding the program and content.

Incentives to encourage participation

Among the strategies highlighted by teachers to motivate students’ participation are Skype and the personal presentations on the social forum. However, according to teachers, one of the downsides is the mostly text-based interactivity characteristic of relationships in social forums, pushing for a video complementation to the tool. Another strategy is to provide feedback on virtual assignments, but given personally, which could help with student’s adherence:

“I get motivated with the social forum, I try to get involved with the presentations forum... but they do feel there is one disadvantage, - warns - … everything is written! For them, to sit and write is to overcome an obstacle, which is writing, composing, language”. (MP, March 2012).

“We have been trying to communicate through video, but I upload them on YouTube and they download it” (CP, March 2012).

“Combining the virtual and the on-site aspects. Because it has happened to me a few times and I become self aware for not being able to evaluate what was done on the virtual portion. That is, providing feedback on what was done during the week on the platform on the following meeting. If that is accomplished, we will be able to improve a lot, which will allow us to keep going” (HA, March 2012).

Shortcomings in reading and comprehension in pending assignments

According to teachers, basic shortcomings in reading comprehension prevent students from understanding instructions they provide using the platform’s forums:

“My kids read next to nothing! It’s true... they read some parts and ignore others, I don’t understand why... They do not perform an exhaustive reading! It’s as if they read the first and the last part and many times answer their questions based on such questions. I see this very often”. (MP, March, 2012).

“We are dealing with students that live in an era of image and sound – for us, it was writing. They have grown up with video, interactive games, blackberry – for them, writing is secondary, even though it is fundamental for us! Therefore, a tool such as this one must be visual and contain video in order to be fully used!” (CP, March 2012).
A different group of teachers feels that writing is an issue that students handle according to their interests. Anything that is able to capture their attention through social networks, albeit lacking orthographic quality, is developed by the students. This might lead to the reflection that perhaps there is untapped potential within the platform still to be deciphered by teachers and tutors.

**Teacher training**

One of the aspects mentioned by facilitators or teachers participating of the research was the offer of constant training for the use of tools and other areas, such as design:

“I feel I will need support in the phase of design for interfaces. I believe that they’re fine as is, but perhaps a bit too formal for the kids. They probably need more attractive and colorful interfaces, with icons… I will sure need help there!” (MT, March 2012).

“Of course we need, but not one for the technology tool, not for me! It’s not the most important. We need help regarding the semi-traditional [model], that’s what we need to be clear with students about” (HA, March 2012).

Among the mistakes mentioned by teachers approached by the study, the most relevant one seems to be taking as a given that students know the platform because they are in from the technology field and propose to instruct them to solve the issue

**Students demand more investments and attention to D.E.**

The student survey on learning on the semi-traditional model and the contribution compared to the traditional model point to the conclusion that some students in the study prefer the traditional model because they do not own a computer and believe that the alternative demands more of their time and is also often seen as more difficult. Other students claim to not have received all the information, as they are still in the beginning of their career.

“On-site classes are more dynamic and answers to questions come immediately. I am more participative on-site, I do not log-on because I don’t own a computer and I no time to be online” (Informant 26, May 2012).

Another group of students finds advantages on the semi-traditional model because it reinforces their knowledge. There’s availability of material and possibility to capture the teacher’s attention in a more personalized manner. The model allows the student to work more comfortably from home, helps to build confidence and develop self-learning and research skills. Some students suggest improvements in tests and evaluations, requesting more time to finish them.

“It’s better because it gives us more opportunity to do well, more participation, and our participation is taken into account, although they should improve the types of tests and time to answer them” (Informant 31, May 2012).

“D.E. makes it easy to absorb content, helps us to teach ourselves and creates the need to find out more. Unfortunately, when
you have no contact with the teacher and the material is confusing, you’re left with questions” (Informant 48, June 2012)

“There’s more participation from my part because of the discussion forums and they are evaluated. I am always in contact with the teacher online and we discuss the questions” (Informant 51, June 2012)

“The platform system should not be so limited, considering that some people work and study and can only log-on in the evening” (Informant 51, June 2012)

“The teacher should be more specific according to the theme of the day and teachers should make more use of the virtual environment” (Informant 30, May 2012)

“It’s a valuable tool, but it should be better oriented, should be used from the first semester. [The school should] Make an effort so it’s not just a material repository, but a constant interaction wherever you are” (Informant 48, June 2012)

The surveyed students state that the instructions given are clear and precise, and consider it to be a gratifying experience regarding content. Interaction among students is not intense, as 43% of them claim to have not achieved their objective. However, 70% of the surveyed group believes teachers have valued their contribution. A similar portion believes to have developed self-learning skills and a collaborative spirit.

CONCLUSION

VLE’s quality is linked to communication and in the semi-traditional model, written communication is vital. Therefore, the correct use of punctuation signs is vital so teachers become examples to students. The research highlights affection as a theme, contrary to what first impressions, due to the lacking face-to-face contact. It seems that the semi-traditional model does not dismiss the importance of affection at the same time as it makes it clear that it will not treat its students in a childish, paternal way, but consider each of their questions and work on them together. In that sense, the tutor should give the student all the necessary support.

The knowledge on the students’ opinion of VLEs requires a commitment made by all to improve aspects related to communication. On the other hand, it is an invitation to continue developing VLEs, motivation and permanent, full-time capacity building of teachers and students. At the same time, feedback provokes consideration for change in the ins-and-outs of the semi-traditional model.

Among the suggestions brought by the students are platform flexibility and availability and acquisition of better equipment for DCyT. In some cases, there have been requests for more examples and less theoretical content. The demand for more teacher presence in the virtual environment reflects this need.

One recommendation that rises from this research is the motivation of all actors that take part of the activity. Another one is that D.E. specialists, trained for said environments, become part of Seducla’s teams. Also, that these professionals are teachers with developing VLE. Subcontract external specialists should only be a last resource, as experience lies in the hands of the model’s pioneers, who have a lot to say to convince those who still offer some resistance.
REFERENCES


