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Taking the Debate on E-Learning Pedagogical Strategies Beyond Students and Technology Spheres: An Insight into the Instructor's Core Mission

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Abstract: Within nowadays' rapid changing world and the growing complex environments, the academic debate on how to enhance the E-learning pedagogical strategies has focused mainly on two aspects. First, on the quality of technologies as it is strongly employed to ease and assist an active and collaborative learning process to engage students further and guide them towards diverse learning experiences. Second, on fulfilling the needs of the learners in a way to meet their expectations from different cultural backgrounds and learning styles' perspectives. However, few studies emphasized the crucial role of the instructor in this debate, especially how to relate the new learning and teaching paradigm along with the student-centered approach to the effective use of online technologies in education. Hence, the present review argues that among the tripartite elements influencing the E-learning pedagogical strategies, that is, the students, the technology, and the instructor, further in-depth attention should be given to the major role of the instructor. Indeed, as effective knowledge starts with learner's engagement, advancing the debate on the fundamental role of instructors that help in providing a genuine lecturer-student interaction in the virtual learning platforms is crucial to fit the requirements of today's society's educational needs. Therefore, this research emphasizes the crucial instructor's skills that are necessary for students' engagement in the E-learning platforms. Hence, this review goes beyond the conditions of boredom and disengagement to target the roots of the instructor's role and mission to deliver and communicate knowledge effectively, which can be traced back to the "theory of knowledge" and to essential communication skills.

Keywords: E-learning, Pedagogy, Theory of Knowledge, Communication Skills, Student Engagement.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions all over the world are paying close attention to online courses that are developing fast and gaining a wide acceptance (Sangrà, Vlachopoulos, & Cabrera, 2012). At the same time, literature suggests that in terms of outcomes, no major differences exist between the traditional face to face classes and the e-learning platforms. However, significant contrasts exist in terms of factors that influence students' satisfaction (Altunisik, 2013). These factors encompass the content and the quality of the course materials, but most importantly, the interaction between instructors and their students and between students themselves as the interaction process is considered more important than the lecture itself (Ilie & Frăsineanu, 2019). This gives further emphasis on students' engagement, the importance of the student-centered approach, and the fundamental role of the instructor in terms of using innovative means to stimulate discussion, convey knowledge effectively, and raise students' interest, attention, and motivation.

Indeed, student engagement is vital to deliver good quality learning outcomes, as it is a significant predictor of students' performance and academic achievement(Amado & Roleda, 2019; Waraet al., 2018) Consequently, studies on e-learning platforms and student engagement reached a new level of urgency and drove significant research attention in recent times (Eccles & Wang, 2012). The emerging body of literature on online platforms is highlighting their ability to transform students' experience in terms of reflexivity, connectivity, interaction, and hence, affecting their level of engagement (Grindle, 2019).

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In the same line, students' engagement in the e-learning platforms demonstrates their effectiveness in terms of aligning the learning goals, assessments, and activities to accomplish the learning outcomes (Wiggins & McTighe, 2011). On that account, stimulating and maintaining student engagement is a key factor to cope with the existing disengagement issues in the online environments (Parsons, 2017). To this aim, a large body of literature has emphasized enhancing the quality of technologies related to e-learning and satisfying the learners' needs (Anabalon, Flores, Mateos, Zunino, & Misra, 2017).

However, although the backbone of the virtual learning classes are students, and the tremendous technological advances have significant impact on teaching methods and learning procedures; the instructors remain the epistemic authority and the backbone of the learning system. The success of the learning process relies on their guidance and management during the courses' delivery, and on the extent to which they motivate, inspire, and encourage interaction among students (Grindle, 2019). Hence, as the mainstream research on e-learning focuses on technology and students (Rodrigues et al., 2019; Ilie & Frasineanu, 2019), this research aims to advance the debate on how to improve students' learning experience in the virtual environment by digging into the crucial instructor's skills that promote students' engagement and enhance the e-learning pedagogical strategy. Furthermore, as the instructor's core mission is to convey and communicate knowledge, the present research scope is limited, first, to the theory of knowledge and the roots of how to convey knowledge. Second, to the basic means of communication that equips instructors to gain students' trust and focus. However, having an insight into the e-learning context and its challenges is fundamental.

A. E-Learning and its challenges

E-learning is an evolving aspect of distance learning (Sangrà, Vlachopoulos, & Cabrera, 2012). It reflects a mode of teaching where both the instructor and the learner are disjoined in space and time by using online tools to bridge the gap (Singh & Hussain, 2020). The" E" in E-learning is the abbreviation of "electronic", therefore E-learning reflects a web-empowered mode of education that is growing in a fast pace due to the web and the tremendous internet facilities. E-learning is more efficient when utilized in combination between new techniques and conventional methods of learning. This is because E-learning covers a comprehensive approach that encompasses many recent opportunities and new learning processes of delivering knowledge that go beyond the conventional face to face classrooms (Rodrigues et al., 2019). However, although the electronic learning concept covers a broad range of approaches, ways of implementations, processes, and diverse academic fields (Hubalovskya et al., 2019); the European Commission (2001) has provided a standardized and a worldwide accepted definition, as it portrays E-learning as the use of new multimedia technologies and the World Wide Web to enhance and enrich the quality of learning. This objective can be reached through assisting and easing the exchange, collaboration and the use of facilities and services remotely.

Within the electronic learning environment, multiple methods might be utilized to improve learners' engagement. This is by including a responsive and inclusive environment that fits students' interests, expectations, motivation, and attention. To do so, the online experience should be mindful of the following criteria: Skills of the educator (LaVelle et al., 2020; Baya'a and Daher, 2015), the learners' social and economic conditions (Scherer and Siddiq, 2019; Che Sulaiman et al., 2020), and the quality of the learning management system, like incorporating the gamification concept in the process of learning (Zainuddin et al., 2020; Alsubhi et al., 2019). Additionally, to tackle the critical particularities of the e-learning components, four main views should be taken into consideration (Arkorful and Abaidoo, 2015; Guri-Rosenblit and Gros, 2011). First, considering E-learning as technology driven, due to the fact that most definitions emphasize technological features. Second, seeing E-learning as a delivery-system process, because students in the online environment have more access to resources than the conventional learning environment. Third, the crucial aspect of communication should be emphasized, as collaboration, communication and interaction, are key factors for a successful online learning environment. Lastly, the method of delivering and conveying knowledge in the e-learning platform should be considered as a distinct educational paradigm, because it brings a significant added value to the traditional one and should be seen as a new way of learning.

To provide an efficient learning experience to learners, different elements should be emphasized in the E-learning environment (Rodrigues et al., 2019; Persico et al., 2014; Paechter et al., 2010; Paechter and Maier, 2010). Among them, first, the quality of the course design is critical, in addition to other characteristics such as the learning materials and the electronic course environment. The critical aspects of the mentioned characteristics lie in the fact that student focus in the e-learning environment is much lower in comparison to the traditional environment. Hence, the assessments, learning activities, and the course objectives should be aligned to the intended learning outcomes. Additionally, both the program objectives and the course objectives should be consistent and aligned, to ensure efficient learning. Second, being conscious of the significant correlation between the extent to which students may achieve the learning outcomes and the level

of their new competencies and skills related to the E-learning environment is crucial. Without mastering certain fundamental skills in the e-learning environment, such as being methodical, and focusing on factual knowledge and concepts that allow to enhance students' social and personal skills, it is more likely that the intended learning outcomes will not be completely achieved. Third, delivering knowledge without creating an interactive environment will deplete all the efforts to provide effective knowledge. Interaction during the e-learning environment is vital for learners to get full benefit. Therefore, to promote interaction in the virtual environment, instructors should, prior to the classes, provide materials on the structure and the course content to give students a chance and time for reflecting on the content, and to stimulate their motivation for better interaction in the online classes. This will promote/develop students' socio-emotional skills and create a conducive environment for interaction with the instructor and between students. Lastly, the individual learning processes are very important, where providing opportunities for students to practice and apply what they have learnt in the e-environment will expand the focus and capacity of absorbing the delivered knowledge.

The COVID-19 pandemic which was started in the Wuhan city of China has brought the damages of unprecedented scale and magnitude (Hassan, et al., 2020; 2021). Almost every sector has got affected by the current pandemic and education sector is no exception (Mohd, et al., 2020; Rabbani, et al., 2020; Rabbani, 2020). The ongoing pandemic in terms of COVID-19 has posed another challenge to the education sector to bring new and innovative, Tec based model of education. Various online virtual education system is proposed by the researchers such as (Khan et al., 2020; 2021), which is not affected situation like pandemic, war and declining student enrollment. The e-learning was used to be a luxury but now it has turned out to be the requirement amid this pandemic Atif, et al., 2020). The e-learning resources needs to be developed by the institutions in terms of providing the technical and personnel infrastructure to enhance the teaching pedagogy (Ali, et. al. 2020; Sun, et. al., 2020; Rabbani, et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has paved for the next decade of the twenty first century to be dominated by the technology and technological innovations led by the artificial intelligence, Blockchain, digital currency, cloud computing and quantum computing etc. (Khan and Rabbani, 2020a; 2020b). Among the tripartite elements influencing the E-learning pedagogical strategies, that is, the students, the technology, and the instructor, further in-depth attention should be given to the major role of the technology and realities in the student's mind so as to build the full picture (Cornford, 1935, p2).

As an illustration, Plato is clarifying to us that the transmission of knowledge as raw material to the learner is irrelevant. Instead, the instructor should play the role of facilitator of learning by relying on a constructive approach and creating opportunities for students that allow to process and digest the received knowledge. Likewise, Plato's teacher "Socrates" who is a notorious academician and lecturer worldwide, illustrated his own method of teaching in this way: "I consider myself as a midwife" (Cornford, 1935, p17). Through the "midwife metaphor", Socrates is conveying a deep understanding on how instructors should instruct their students. Indeed, as midwives deliver newborns from patients, not from themselves, hence, instructors should not replicate their own ideas in the students' minds. Instead, they should extend students' thoughts through stimulating constructive discussions, providing examples, deepening variables, and helping them to explore and reflect on existing and pragmatic knowledge from real life, which is the core of the student-centered learning approach.

The pedagogical content knowledge model of Shulman (1986, 1987) underpins further the instructor's crucial role in delivering effective knowledge in the e-learning environment. Shulman argued that the instructor's level of expertise should be determined by the interaction between the instructor's pedagogical knowledge (related to the theory of knowledge), and the content knowledge. In this regard, Koehler & Mishra (2009) and Niess et al. (2009) used the model of Shulman and provided a more comprehensive model that highlights the interaction between knowledge content, and educational and pedagogical technologies to provide more effective approaches in the e-learning environment.

On the same line, (Antlová, Chudý, Buchtová, & Kulerová, 2015) expressed the learning procedure as not being a direct process of delivering knowledge, but rather an emotional, unconscious and more intuitive. Additionally, (Antlová, Chudý, Buchtová, & Kulerová, 2015) argued that students should not be viewed as a passive actor in the learning process; on the contrary, effective knowledge is an active back and forth interaction between students and instructors. Otherwise, it would deplete the vital critical and forward-thinking skills of the learners. Preserving students' mental process of thinking through stimulating their cognition, emotions, motivation, memory, learning, along with the evaluation process, is crucial for students' engagement and effective learning in the e-learning environment.

To summarize, students are active agents in the learning and thinking process. Hence, the major role of the instructor in the learning process is to help students acquire knowledge instead of delivering knowledge to them. This vital reality could be further assimilated when we understand the two major steps in how students digest knowledge. First is the "sensation stage" where students rely in the first place on their basic biological experiences which cover hearing, seeing, touching, and smelling (Alsubhi, Sahari, & Wook, 2019). Then comes the

"perceptual stage", where the received raw information through senses, triggers a deeper level of understanding and sorting of information. It starts with the "cognition", which reflects the process of organizing and thinking the received raw information. Then the "affective process" starts, which determines students' attraction or repulsion towards the processed information. Then the "interpretative stage" which allows students to develop meanings toward the processed information. Finally, the "evaluative stage", where students develop preferences and values based on the processed information (Liu, Lim, Taylor, & Calvo, 2019). After, emphasizing the importance of helping students to acquire knowledge, the next section highlights the crucial basic communication skills that help promote student engagement in the e-learning platforms.

B- Basic communication skills

Communication skills and motivating students in the virtual classes are fundamental means to influence positive attitude and interest towards the subject taught. As education is also a communication exercise and performance, the teacher's effectiveness in the learning process has an extensive connection with how he/she communicates with students. Communication is also a significant means for shaping behavior, opinions, values, and beliefs. This is through different tools such as the non-verbal and verbal communication media (Barna & Barna, 2012). Communication is also considered as a strong means to impact others through different symbols (Tok & Temel, 2014). Hence, communication has a critical and considerable place in training and education, which rely fundamentally on the value and quality of communication between students and instructors (Gulec & Temel, 2015). Therefore, instructors' effectiveness is tightly linked with their level of mastering communication skills (McNatt, 2019).

The forgotten core mission of the higher education institutions regarding students, is to help them become more articulate and express their ideas easily in a clear, structured and forward-thinking way. Nonetheless, if the instructors do not master the basics of communication skills, it would be a vain mission to convey the lacking skills to students, and becomes harder to influence and have an impact on them. Consequently, as lecturing is in the first place a matter of communicating knowledge, mastering non-verbal and verbal communication skills is crucial, especially in the virtual environment (Gulec & Temel, 2015). To this aim, it is argued that non-verbal communication means are the most essential and critical in the virtual platforms for many reasons. The most important one is that verbal communication mainly conveys information, while non-verbal communication helps in expressing emotions. Hence, non-verbal communication helps establish trust, attention, focus, and helps set up the student's mind to acquire and accept the conveyed knowledge. (Karnieli-Miller, 2020).

Similarly, compelling literature underpins the significant value of developing non-verbal communication tools for more productive courses and effective teaching. In this regard, a related study on communication means, performed by professor Albert Mehrabian (2009) argued that paradoxically, the verbal signs or verbal communication influence just 7% of the entire communicated message; while, the form of the voice such as the pitch, tone, inflection and tempo, influence the communicated message by 38%; and nearly 55% of influence is generated by the non-verbal signs such as gesture, body language, and posture. On the same lines, the anthropologist Raymond Birdwhistell (1970) argued that within the communicated, the non-verbal communication aspect goes beyond 65% (Pease, 2003). Therefore, the subsequent sections highlight the fundamental communication means that are crucial to increase student engagement in the virtual platforms. Namely, body language, voice pace, and pauses, which all belong to the non-verbal communication tools (Phillips, 2011).

1- Body language

In the interactive learning process (Gulec & Temel, 2015), reaching the efficient level of teaching depends on both verbal and non-verbal communication tools. In this regard, the body language tool belongs to the sub-category of non-verbal communication skills, which is considered as the original and first human being language. It is vital during the process of lecturing and teaching, because along with the conveyed knowledge, the instructor may consciously or not convey positive or negative messages to their students. Defined as the postures, unconscious and conscious body movements whereby attitude and feelings are communicated and conveyed, the body language is all-important in the teaching process (Meitar, Karnieli-Miller, & Eidelman, 2009). Therefore, the level of expertise and the value of the instructors cannot be based only on their level of knowledge and mastering the subject taught, as the way they convey their knowledge is as important as the knowledge itself. The body language can be expressed through different means such as gestures and facial expressions, clothing and posture, the voice intonation and its pace. These fundamental communication tools help to convey clear messages reflecting moods, attitude, and the extent to which harmony and symbiose in the virtual environment are established between the instructor and the students (Gulec & Temel, 2015). This is because body language sends strong indications and signs to students about the significance of the message and the instructor's level of mastery and confidence.

For instance, within the common situation in classes where students are gossiping and disturbing others from learning, the instructor can use means other than disrupting the class and talking to the students to quiet them down, such as, using body language like making eye contact, or staring at the students with a special facial expression that conveys a strong and effective message without interrupting the lecture. As a result, the instructors should be conscious that continuous and mutual interaction with their students is always occurring in their classes. Hence, mastering these body languages during the virtual classes helps the instructors to communicate properly and efficiently with their students and promote a favorable environment for student engagement and interaction (Duta, Panisoara, & Panisoara, 2015). Similarly, by simply observing the students' body language, the instructor can feel and grasp the level of students' confusion and understanding. This is why without any verbal communication tools, people can express their acceptance and approval by simply nodding their head, and their love by holding their friend's hand. Also, most of the engaging communications include both verbal and non-verbal communication tools where using face and body expressions are key aspects to hook the listener while talking (McNatt, 2019). For the above-mentioned reasons, the present article argues that turning off the camera in the virtual environment from both the instructor and the students' sides may be one of the reasons of students' disengagement in the e-learning platforms.

2-Voice pace

Basaran & Erdem (2009) argued that communication means like the audibility of the speaker, tempo, voice pace, pitch, intonation, and voice stress have a considerable influence on the delivered message effectiveness. Otherwise, boredom is the natural outcome of using a monotonous tempo and tone. An illustrative example that could be made to describe the negative effect of a monotonous voice pace during the lecture delivery on students' attention, is to come with an ordinary piano device and then strike an identical note repeatedly… Actually, it reflects the definition of boredom. Pitch characteristics, like the silent acoustic element of the voice, is related to social power and has an effect on how we perceive the power of the speaker. It also has an influence on the individual's ability for leadership and dominance (Aung and Puts, 2020). Bringing back the discussion to e-learning, several studies indicated that efficient online communication is strongly correlated with the tone of voice (Oh and Ki, 2019; Short, Williams, and Christie, 1976). This outcome is based on the social presence theory (i.e., referring to the sense of being together), which is used as a general appellation to examine presence in online communication and helped researchers to understand the correlation between the voice intonation, the perception of social presence, and the intention to engage in virtual communications (Biocca, Harms, & Burgoon, 2003). In the same vein, social presence is vital for a constructive relationship between the speaker and the audience and increases the element of trust (Beldad, De Jong, & Steehouder, 2010; Cyr, Hassanein, Head, & Ivanov, 2007).

Hence, instructors should be aware of this significant communication tool (i.e., voice pace), in order to maintain focus and engagement during E-learning classes. Thus, they should be using contrasting tones that vary between high and low, expressing feelings, and stressing on particular key ideas and keywords during their lecture (Karnieli-Miller, 2020).

3- Pauses

As the Scottish philosopher Thomas Carlyle (2006) articulated, if speech is human, silence is divine… and out of silence comes the strength. Therefore, silence may rise to the eloquence stage if well implemented during the lecture delivery time. Including various moments of pauses provides the instructors with significant communication tools to increase engagement and focus (Barna & Barna, 2012). On the same lines, Kaushal & Mishra, (2017) suggested that one of the fundamental non-verbal communicating means to attract students' focus and attention is to pause either after, before, or both after and before a significant idea. Consequently, neglecting the principle of pauses is not recommended for any instructor seeking effectiveness with students. As stated by (Carnagey & Esenwein, 2005) in their book "The Art of Speaking", pauses are so far the most powerful communication tool ever used by outstanding speakers. Thus, utilizing pauses during the lecture time is a significant tool for instructors in the e-learning environment.

CONCLUSION

The current covid-19 pandemic has emphasized further the urge to develop actual e-learning pedagogical strategies in the educational system worldwide (Khan, et al., 2021). It also urges all professionals of the education sector and all academicians over the world to think profoundly about education in the post pandemic era. This article argued that among the tripartite elements influencing students' engagement in the e-learning environment, students and technologies took the forefront among researchers, while few considerations were given to the major role of the instructor. Hence, the present study attempted to bring the students' disengagement issue in the e-learning environment to the root and genuine role of the instructor in the process of learning. It is argued that understanding and practicing the theory of knowledge, and acquiring certain basic communication skills may deplete significantly the issue of student disengagement in the virtual classes. Therefore, first, the genuine role of the

instructor should be to help students acquire knowledge rather than deliver knowledge to them. Second, encouraging instructors to master some basic communication skills is crucial to maintain and promote students' engagement. Nonetheless, the powerful nonverbal communication tools like pauses, voice pace, and body language, suggest that turning off the camera during the online classes, particularly from the instructor side will strip him/her out from a critical engaging tool. This assumption related to the possible correlation between the instructor's non-verbal communication tools, the crucial process of acquiring knowledge, and the level of students' engagement in the virtual platforms, should be further explored in future studies using both positivist and non-positivist paradigms.

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