Communication technology and education – the role of the discussion group in asynchrony distance-learning courses as a beneficial factor in the learning process / Tali Marcus

Abstract:

E-learning plays a central role in the educational systems of different organizations in general, and academic institutions in particular. Different issues relating to e-learning are the subject of many studies, as researchers attempt to ascertain the uniqueness and the effectiveness of this type of learning.

In light of an analysis of the literature which exists in the field of distance learning, I have proposed in this research paper a model which serves as an important base for considering e-learning courses. In the model, I identify four types of interaction which occur in parallel and in a mixed fashion during distance learning courses – the student's interaction with content, the student's interaction with the instructor, the student's interaction with his peers and the student's interaction with the system.

These types of interaction serve as the structural foundation on which distance learning courses are based. It is important that people who are active in this field understand the inter-relationship between the different dimensions of interaction, as well as their respective positions, roles and its influences on distance learning courses and the effectiveness of such courses.

An examination of the topic of adult education indicates that the e-learning discussion group has substantial positive potential. This potential is apparent with respect to the ability to exploit and implement important principles which are mentioned in the context of these issues – such as collective learning, active learning, feedback and more. It is also apparent when considering the e-learning discussion group as an environment in which the different types of

interaction take place. In light of the above, I have attempted, in this research paper, to analyze the role of the discussion group, as it may contribute to the effectiveness of distance learning courses.

In this research paper, effectiveness of distance learning courses is measured by three parameters: the level of satisfaction of the students with the distance learning method, their impression as to the existence of a positive learning process in the course and their grades in the final exam.

Studies in this field have tended to view the students' level of activity in the discussion group as having a central influence on these factors; however, mixed data and findings have been presented in this context.

A primary hypothesis of this research project was that a positive influence would be discovered between the level of activity of the students in the discussion group and the level of effectiveness (i.e. success) of the e-learning courses, as measured by the aforesaid parameters which have been chosen.

In order to test the hypothesis, a population of students participating in five basic Jewish studies e-learning courses which are given in Bar-Ilan University's "High Learn" e-learning system was chosen. A unique questionnaire, which addresses the level of the students' satisfaction from the distance learning method on the basis of an analysis of the structure of the e-learning course, and taking into account each of the four types of interaction mentioned above, was prepared. Similarly, and based on an analysis of the relevant literature in the field, the students were asked questions in the questionnaire which address the issue of the learning process; this, in order to ascertain whether in the eyes of the students, a positive learning process took place. The data was collected at the time that each group concluded its final exam; in total, 130 questionnaires were collected. An analysis of the students' responses, the final grades and the activity report of the students reveals that

the primary hypotheses of this research project were confirmed only minimally.

The results of research show that generally, the level of the students' activity did not influence their final grade, nor did it influence their level of satisfaction from the course. To the contrary – a negative relationship between the students' level of satisfaction and their level of activity in the discussion group was discovered. Similarly, there was no influence, and no connection was found, between the level of activity of the students in the discussion group and the level of their proximity (closeness) to the content of the course.

An effort to explain these results would suggest that the nature of the courses is an important factor in shaping the students' expectations from the course; this apparently influences the manner in which the students respond to the discussion group and the activity of the discussion group. Due to the fact that the courses chosen were mandatory courses which are not within the students' professional fields, the students, as demonstrated by the open portion of the questionnaire, elected to participate in the applicable course primarily due to considerations of time and convenience; the topic of interaction and interest in the content of the course were secondary considerations for the students. In light of this, it can be assumed that the potential of the discussion group was not sufficiently realized.

The conclusions of this research project indicate that with respect to each e-learning course, the role of the discussion group and the goal which it serves should be carefully considered. The discussion group "tool" should not be utilized for the sole reason that it is available and can be implemented from a logistical perspective.

Similarly, the recommendations of this research project are to continue to accrue additional knowledge of lecturers and students with respect to the unique nature of distance learning courses, the manner of conducting e-

discussion groups and the correct exploitation of such discussion groups in the context of these courses. By increasing our knowledge in this area, we can strive to realize the substantial positive potential of the discussion group in as a beneficial factor in the distance learning process.

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