

How to Make a Virtual Classroom More Interactive

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ABSTRACT

Blended teaching and online learning have recently been implemented at UEH University. The majority of students, on the other hand, appear to be reluctant to online instruction. The goal of the study is to enhance students' interaction in online classes. The theory of increasing online teaching interactivity has been applied in the research, which includes interactions between students and the course content, interactions between teachers and students, and interactions among students. The research took place over two semesters and lasted 120 hours, involving 70 participants. After the students complete one unit of the syllabus, each group is assigned to do a team project or make a presentation online. The research data is gathered through observations by the teacher and a questionnaire designed to assess the quality of the online course. The findings demonstrate that working on projects can improve the students' interaction and communication. Through group work, students participate in collaborative learning during the course. These interactions can boost students' online learning motivation and efficiency; therefore, they can help them improve their performance. It is suggested that the value of interaction should be emphasized in the online setting.

Keywords: interaction, team projects, blended teaching.

1 Introduction

University of Economics, Ho Chi Minh City has transformed from the traditional classroom into blended learning which combines both teaching in the classroom and online teaching. The policy of the university is that 70% of classes is conducted in the classroom and 30% is taught online during the course. Therefore, the teacher should modify the content of the course in the way that meets the objectives of the learning outcome and also satisfies the students' needs. More importantly, because of the covid-19 pandemic, online teaching is applied to any educational institutions, which arises the question of how to teach online more effectively to all teachers. The fact is that most of the students seem to be passive, demotivated and unresponsive to the online teaching. They are reluctant to join the online classes and neglect the attention when studying online. The interviews with the colleagues and the students show that online teaching is not as effective as the traditional classroom because the students lack the interaction or communication with the content of the course, with the other students and with the teacher.

As a result, this study was conducted in the hope of improving the quality of online education by increasing student involvement during the course. This approach encourages active learning, effective supervision, and high-quality online learning (Woo & Reeves, 2007).

2 Literature Review

Both teachers and students face a lot of difficulties as well as challenges in online learning and student attrition from online is very high (Carr, 2000). The truth is that students may experience a lack of social interaction and anonymity. Students might spend less time online than in traditional classrooms. As a result, the teacher must design a course that is comparable to a face-to-face course in terms of learning objectives, materials, and assignments, as well as student learning outcomes (MacKinnon, 2002).



Interactivity plays a vital part in the learning process, and the level of interactivity has an impact on the quality of online training, according to prior studies (Tu, 2000, Muirhead, 2001).

Students' contentment, motivation, retention, and academic progress are all influenced by their interactions. In online teaching, the concept of interaction is more complicated than in traditional classroom instruction. Before implementing online teaching, the teacher must examine the following factors: students' personalities, learning styles, media used, support, and a sense of learning community (Picciano, 2002).

In this research, there are three forms of interaction mentioned in online teaching such as the interaction between students and teachers, the interaction among students, and the interaction of students with content (Moore, 1989). In fact, three kinds of interaction cannot be separated, however, they are involved and supported each other in many ways. The "Community of inquiry" model of online learning (Rourke et al. 2001) shows a whole picture of all factors having an effect on teaching online. The figures indicate the combination among cognitive experience, teaching presence and social presence in online courses.

2.1 Learner-Content Interaction

Learner-content interaction can refer to PowerPoint presentations, audio/video presentations, group projects, individual projects, and embedded course resources in online contexts (Marks, Sibley, & Arbaugh, 2005). Such tasks require the students to have problem-solving skills, analyzing skills and critical thinking skills, which can contribute to the success of their learning process.

Current technologies are used to create a wide variety of teaching resources as well as learning resources. The teacher may enhance the students' motivation by choosing the materials which are appropriate for the students' needs, showing the importance of the material, and stating that the tests will be based on the material.

Janicki and Liegle (2001) developed a list of concepts that assist good Web-based instructional design. Instructors who teach online should act as facilitators and employ a range of presenting strategies throughout the course. They also give learners pacing control, clear feedback, and easy navigation.

2.2 Learner-Teacher Interaction

In an online learning environment, learner-teacher interaction is typically accomplished through real-time feedback systems, learning management systems, class discussions, emails, and phone calls (Hawkins et al., 2011). The teacher assists the students with the course content, assesses the students' comprehension, and offers the students encouragement. Among the three types of interaction, learner-teacher interaction is the greatest benefit to the students' learning motivation.

Picciano (1998) discovered that instructors' engagement in online education courses was connected to students' perceptions of learning. The teaching activities can facilitate the students' learning and improve their interaction with the teacher. The teacher is supposed to consider what kinds of activities and tasks, or what techniques should be applied in the course, especially in each lesson. In addition, a learning community is built between the teacher and the students. The teacher gives them encouragement, advice and comments on their work.

The teachers also have to overcome the challenges of faceless classroom and apply student-centered teaching to virtual classes. More importantly, the roles of the teachers have not changed in any setting. However, the teachers can adopt three roles — cognitive, affective, and managerial in online classes based on their own contexts (Coppola, Hiltz and Rotter, 2001)

2.3 Learner-Learner Interaction

Learner-to-learner interaction occurs when one or more students interact during a class discussion or while working on a project together (Moore, 1989). In an online course, the teacher can develop team projects, debates, role playing, small group discussions, and chats for discussion and brainstorming to ensure learner-to-learner engagement.

One of the most influential characteristics of online courses appears to be student interaction through course discussions (Swan et al. 2000). Wells (1992) asserts that subjects that involve discussion, brainstorming, and reflection are best suited to the online format. In terms of this, team projects or group presentations may be the best option for the students to practice tasks. The students have to negotiate and share the ideas with each other when working in group. They also brainstorm in the phase of preparation to make an outline before presenting their product to the whole class.

Online communication encourages idea exchange, more distributed participation, and collaborative thinking. As a result, there is a link between perceived learning and discussions and teachers' discussion instructions.

3 Methodology

The research has been conducted for six months with 120 hours of study, including the participation of 70 freshmen from the university. The data of the study has been collected through the teacher's observation and from the questionnaire. The questions in the survey cover the main points in the research: the learner-content interaction, the learner-teacher interaction and the learner-learner interaction, and how making a presentation contributes to increase the interactivity in online classes. The survey is carried out at the end of the course by the students.

In online teaching, an interactive course must be designed by the teacher. All four skills such as listening, speaking, reading and writing are integrated in the syllabus with the emphasis on communication skills. The content of the course meets the students' needs and their expectations. Importantly, the students can easily have an access to the online sources related to the material they are learning.

Students anticipate their lecturers to take a more active part in teaching online courses, according to Oliver et al., (2009). Furthermore, the teachers must create a favorable student-teacher relationship as well as a welcoming learning environment (Borup et al.,2014). Students are more ready to voice their thoughts and contribute to classes in such situations, therefore an online learning experience may boost their motivation. In order to promote the students' interaction of three types, the students can be assigned a team project or a presentation after finishing one unit of the course. During the course, some team projects are done by groups of the students. The students need the advice and encouragement from the teacher during the process. It is essential that the teacher can guide them to choose the relevant and suitable kind of project or the topic of the presentation. In addition, the teacher also comments on the steps of preparation for their work, how to collect information, what ideas included in the project and how to present it online effectively.

When doing the project, the students are free to choose the content or the topic they wish to work on. The requirement is that the project is concerned with the content of the unit they have learned. The students can use any kinds of technologies or software which can illustrate their points. During the projects, the students have to interact with each other to plan their project, and divide the role and the part they will be responsible for. To complete the tasks, of course, a variety of online sources and new technologies has been adopted.

3.1 The Procedure

The main coursebook is Business Partner B1+ by Iwonna Dubicka, Margaret O’Keeffe, Bob Dignen, Mike Hogan, Lizzie Wright (2018). The teacher can choose any materials from different sources as supplementary. At the beginning of the research, the theory and practice of making a presentation in Business Skills is taught extensively to the students. The lesson outcome is that the learners are aware of techniques for beginning a presentation and can use a range of signposting phrases to structure a presentation and highlight main ideas.

Some standard techniques to help students make a confident and effective start:

- Start with a warm welcome
- Tell your name and job title (or what you do)
- Mention the objective of the presentation
- Explain the organization of the presentation
- Say how long it lasts
- Let the audience know when to ask questions
- Move to the first point in the presentation
- Continue with the following points
- Illustrate and clarify the main points by supporting ideas, examples or visual aids.
- Remember to give a conclusion or summary at the end of the speech.

In addition, Functional Language of signposting in presentations is incorporated to improve learners' capacity to operate in real-world English working contexts. When students are prepared for business settings such as a meeting, a presentation, or an interview, this section is considered helpful language support.

The signposting phrases from the presentations cover:

- Beginning the presentation
- Sequencing
- Highlighting important information
- Referring to visuals
- Referring to different sections of the presentation
- Inviting questions
- Dealing with questions
- Closing

To make a good preparation for their talk, the students have to watch the video or listen to the talk in the unit. They do all the listening tasks to get the information or ideas to think about the questions in the part of Reflection. They also cover Functional Language before writing an outline for the topic or planning their work. The students can work in pairs, work in groups, roleplay or so on to fulfil their assignment.

Firstly, the teacher divides the class into groups and assigns the task to each group. Each group is asked to give a presentation or to do a team project about the topic related to the unit in the course. Secondly, the teacher discusses the topics the students are willing to talk about, guides them how to collect the information and how to assign the role of each person in the group. Thirdly, the group submits the outline of their talk to the teacher in which they mention the topic they are ready to present, and list the main points, the supporting points, and visual aids or any video to illustrate their presentation. The teacher can discuss the ideas with the students and give comments on their assignment. Moreover, the teacher can help them to solve their problems, and modify the outline. During the process, the students have to work in

group to complete the task through cooperative learning. Finally, the group should report the work or their project to the whole class online. When presenting their product, they will call other groups to interact with them by asking and answering some questions related to their talk. In that way, the whole class can get involved in the activity. At the end of their presentation, the teacher should give detailed feedback and make an assessment to the whole group and to each student.

4 Results and Discussion

The data for the study was gathered through observation by the teacher and a questionnaire.

The questionnaire is designed to measure the satisfaction and efficiency on the relationship between the students with the content, the teacher, and the other students when they are working jointly on the project.

4.1 The Questionnaire

Table 1: *The interaction between the students with the content*

	Totally agree	Agree	Disagree	Totally disagree
The online course is interactive.	22.9%	65.7%	11.4%	0%
You can access the link of the course content.	48.6%	48.6%	2.8%	0%
It is easy to practice tasks online during the course.	25.7%	68.6%	5.7%	0%

In terms of interaction between the students with the content, 88.6 % of the students agree that the online course is interactive, 97.2 % of them can access the link of the course content, and 94.3 % say that it is easy to practice tasks online. Few students seem to be reluctant in studying online because they may get used to the face- to- face classroom and they have some technical problems. Therefore, the teacher should modify the content of the course so that all the students can find it more interesting and more interactive, which can motivate the students in participating in the online classes.

Table 2: *The interaction between the students with the teacher*

	Totally agree	Agree	Disagree	Totally disagree
The teacher lists the contact information on the syllabus	45.7%	48.6%	5.7%	0%
The teacher sets up communication guidelines and expectations	48.6%	48.6%	2.8%	0%
The teacher gives prompt and detailed feedback on assessments and discussions responses.	42.9%	57.1%	0%	0%

In terms of interaction between the students with the teacher, only 2.8 % of the responses show that the teacher should pay more attention to setting up communication guidelines and expectations. And 100% of them totally agree or agree with the feedback and responses from the teacher on the students' performance

and assessments. This indicates that the teacher can manage the class effectively and most of the students are satisfied with the role of the teacher in online classes.

Table 3: *The interaction among the students*

	Totally agree	Agree	Disagree	Totally disagree
You are supposed to do group or team projects within the course	42.9%	57.1%	0%	0%
Group chats and emails are encouraged in class	42.9%	57.1%	0%	0%
The teacher sets up a thread where the students facilitate the learning	37.1%	51.4%	11.4%	0.1%

In terms of interaction among the students, 42.9 % of them totally agree and 57.1 % agree that they are supposed to do group or team projects within the course. Because of group work, group chats and emails are encouraged in class. 11. 5% suggest that the teacher should set up more threads where the students can facilitate their learning with the other groups in class. Most of the students work well with their partners in group, which leads to the collaborative learning.

Table 4: *The efficiency of team projects*

	Totally agree	Agree	Disagree	Totally disagree
The presentations can make the course more interactive	31.4%	62.9%	5.7%	0%
You can discuss the ideas of the presentations with the teacher	25.7%	68.6%	5.7%	0%
You are willing to work in group to complete the presentations	42.9%	57.1%	0%	0%

In terms of team projects, 94.3 % of the students believe that the presentations can make the course more interactive and say that they can discuss the ideas of the presentations with the teacher. More importantly, all of them are willing to work in group to complete the tasks.

The results of the questionnaire show that making a presentation or doing team projects has a major effect on promoting the students’ interaction in online classes.

4.2 The Teacher’s Observation

From the teacher’s observation, the research seems to be successful in terms of increasing interactivity in the online classroom. The teacher has observed the students’ discussions to develop their projects in groups

until they present their work to the whole class online through any online applications such as Zoom, Google Meet and so on.

Most of the students get involved in speaking, listening, reading and writing to fulfill their tasks. Each student is assigned to be in charge of each task in their group. Based on the topic they are going to present; they find suitable materials from a variety of sources by reading and listening. Then they discuss and negotiate with the partners which ideas or information should be included in the outline. They seem to be engaged in the process to have a good performance to make their presentations more effectively. In this way, they interact with the content of the course.

The students can ask for the teacher's ideas or advice during the discussions. The teacher can help them to collect the information, guide them how to work in group effectively, and design tasks to enhance their interactivity during the research. The previous researches show that interaction can lead to deep learning. The students can interact with the teacher directly in online classes or sending emails...The teacher can modify their outlines before presentations. The students feel free to contact with the teacher, so it is easy to follow their steps.

The students also find the groupwork exciting and interesting. They share the work, and the ideas to play their roles. Their relationship is getting better because they know how to manage the conflicts to contribute to the tasks. In addition, they have an opportunity to learn together and show their confidence.

All three kinds of interaction are weaved and highlighted in the online learning process. As a result, most of the students find the content of the course the most interesting and relevant because they can choose what they are interested in to present to the whole class. On the one hand, the students enjoy the relationship with their friends to fulfil their tasks and they can learn through cooperation. On the other hand, they feel more motivated and happier with the help and comments from the teacher. This results in having a more energetic climate and a friendly atmosphere in online learning.

5 Conclusion

Based on the observation and the data collected, the teacher has found out the positive impact of team projects to promote the students' interaction and communication in online learning. It is obvious that the research has brought many benefits in online learning to the students as well as the teachers. During the course, the students are involved in collaborative learning through the groupwork. They appear to be more active and responsive to the online teaching. However, the course should be well-organized and modified in more detail by the teacher to meet the requirements of the university and meet the expectations of the students. Besides the course, the teacher also focuses on creating the group projects or team work to enhance the interaction among the students. As a teacher, the researcher should build a good relationship with the students by giving them prompt responses and advice on their work. The interaction with the content, with other students and with the teacher can be weaved or combined during the online course because they cannot be separated from each other. These types of interactions can enhance students' motivation and effectiveness of learning online, which lead to improve their performance and grades. It is recommended that more research should be done extensively in this area to prove its more advantages to the online teaching. The research suggests that the emphasis of interaction need to be highlighted in the online environment for all classes at University of Economics, HCM City.

Author's Biography

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